

ISSUE 12

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TRASH!  
EXPLOITATION!  
CULT!

Free

## Issue 12: Trash, Exploitation and Cult Volume 1

*Trash* n. *Trash* v. *To Trash*, *Trashing*, *Trashes*,

1. For those of us brought up with the British English lexicon the word “trash” seems both familiar and yet foreign. In the UK the word of choice is “rubbish”. The word “trash” is more commonly found in American English and more likely to be heard in American movies. Trash is the discards, the refuse and garbage of American culture. In this respect, unlike the word “rubbish”, “trash” brings to mind the theme of Americanisation and global products such as Coca Cola or McDonald; Cheap, fast, “feel good” food often lacking in quality and nutritional value. It is in this respect that we might move from the noun “Trash” to the verb “To Trash”. “To Trash” is to devalue, to denigrate, to lower the cultural standards to the level of mindless consumerism. “Trash” signals the destruction of bourgeois taste, the blurring of high and low art and the globalisation of consumerism. In terms of cinema we might think of the leftover detritus of the Hollywood studios: the unnecessary remake, the mindless action film or the tedious rom-com.
2. The noun “Trash” may also be compared to the noun “Shit”. Shit is something beyond rescue or revision; it is simply something waiting to be flushed away.
3. But “Trash” also denotes something positive. The trash cinephile searches through cinema’s garbage hoping to find forgotten or rejected gems. Whilst films such as *Troll 2* or *Myra Breckenridge* have been labeled the worst films ever made, it is important to note that many such films may, in retrospect, turn out to be simply not conforming to conventional or mainstream tastes. In this respect, trash films are often cult films. If *Star Wars* is credited as having a cult following, it often totters on the edge of being a full blown religion. Other films, such as *Boon*, *Pink Flamingos*, *Forbidden Zone*, *El Topo* or *Eraserhead*, derive their cult status in their heterodoxical relationship to Hollywood template. Trash is a low budget or counter-aesthetic incompatible with this Hollywood template.
4. “Trash”, however, is often more specifically applied to exploitation cinema. Exploitation films are often genre films that exploit popular trends and niche interests to make a quick buck. The term exploitation is broad and can cover anything from the B-movies of Ed Wood or Roger Corman to the gore films of Herschell Gordon Lewis. Prevalent topics for exploitation films are sex, violence, horror, gore, drugs, martial arts and science fiction. Exploitation cinema spans countless subgenres such as sexploitation, nunsploitation, blaxploitation and nazisploitation and films such as Russ Meyer’s *Up!*, Jesus Franco’s *Vampyros Lesbos*, Cesare Canevari’s *The Gastapo’s Last Orgy*, Roger Corman’s *The Trip*, Jack Hill’s *Foxy Brown* or Nori-bumi Suzuki’s *School of the Holy Beast* are diverse examples.
5. “Trash” is also a disparaging phrase used to describe the working and underclass. Phrases like “white trash” or “trailer trash” are especially pertinent. Trash cinema is

often a kind of underclass cinema caught between carnivalesque spectacle, Chaucerian bawdy comedy and bad taste that sometimes approaches something like the avant-garde rally cry “épater la bourgeoisie”. In this respect, trash cinema is an affront from deviants and social exiles exemplified in the trailer trash of *Pink Flamingos*, the low-life inhabitants of Morteville in *Desperate Living*, or the ghettoised black culture of *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*.

6. *Trash* is also the title of a Paul Morrissey film, which deals with issues of poverty, drug addictions and homosexuality. In the work of directors such as Paul Morrissey, George and Mike Kuchar, Jack Smith, *The Cockettes* and John Waters, trash and queer cinema converge. Such filmmakers explore the life of queers, freaks and dropouts. Whilst diverse in styles and approaches (such as the Hollywood pastiches of the Kuchars, the bad taste of John Waters or the grittier moments of Paul Morrissey) such films offer a strange mixture of the camp and carnivalesque with bodily fluids and bad taste.
7. From Russ Meyer’s failed attempt to direct the Sex Pistol’s film *Who Killed Bambi* to Derek Jarman’s punk film *Jubilee*, trash and punk have intersected in their use of low-fi aesthetics and counter-cultural rebellion. In this respect, trash might also be understood as an attempt to apply the punk motto DO IT YOURSELF to film.
8. Duchamp’s *Fountain* urinal, Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup Cans* prints and Tracy Emin’s *My Bed* all exemplify 20th century art’s attempt to transform trash into high art. Through such actions trash, detritus or everyday utility has been brought into the art space and transformed. Likewise many films, apparently trashy in form, have either moved beyond mere low-brow status and achieving accolade within the establishment, or have gone beyond the merely disposable, using exploitation tropes and trash aesthetics to comment on the human condition. Maybe trash has gone highbrow; maybe it always was. Maybe we can invent a new term: “high trash”.

This issue is dedicated to “trash”, or to put it another way, this issue is dedicated to the hallmarks of underground cinema: Trash, Exploitation and Cult. In this volume, volume 1, we specifically explore exploitation and blaxploitation cinema. We will journey from the splatter film through to spaghetti westerns and blaxploitation cinema, critically engaging with the genre, whilst exploring its eruptions into political and social commentary. In volume 2, we will move onto issues of the exhibition of such films, as well as journeying into the carnivalesque capers of queer cinema.

Bradley Tuck

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# True Blue Confessions of a British Trash Aesthete

I.Q. Hunter



Still from *Bloodsucking Freaks*

1

Gorehounds among you may recall that bit in *Bloodsucking Freaks* (Joel M. Reed, 1976) when a 'doctor' drills into a girl's head and sucks her brains out with a straw. One of those legendary moments of intimate violence, like the 'splinter in the eye' in *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (Lucio Fulci, 1979), it ranks high in cult cinema's pantheon of misogynistic money-shots. An American 'grindhouse' movie shown on 42nd Street under the title *The Incredible Torture Show*, *Bloodsucking Freaks* was the original 'torture porn' film, in which an enterprising lunatic, Sardu (Seamus O'Brien), and his midget assistant, Ralphus (Luis De Jesus), run Theatre of the

Macabre, an S&M show which tortures women in front of audiences who think it is staged. *Bloodsucking Freaks* acquired notoriety as one of the most uncompromising exploitation films of the 1970s and, now re-released on DVD by trash mavens Troma, has become a collectable cult item for thrill-seeking trash cinephiles.

I first saw *Bloodsucking Freaks* in the 1990s on a grainy umpteenth-generation dubbed video, whose grottness complemented the film's sleazy amateurism. In one of those moments of cognitive dissonance encountered when you're an academic specialising in trash, I watched it again recently on pristine DVD, not, I hasten to add, to fantasise about trepanning

young women but to research a chapter on 'Trash Horror and the Cult of the Bad Film' in a scholarly book about the horror genre.<sup>1</sup> It wasn't just for fun, in other words. My declared interest was in how the film, borrowing from Herschell Gordon Lewis's *Wizard of Gore* (1970) and Roger Corman's *Little Shop of Horrors* (1960), plays with ide-

as about art as horror – "It is not SM, it is art," as Sardu insists. This saving element of self-

reflexivity enables cultists and academics like me to read it as an intense statement about exploitation, the voyeurism of audiences, and the instability of art and trash. Now leaving aside my convenient intellectual excuse for watching it at all, what precisely was I getting from the experience of seeing that straw go in and the brains get sucked out? I don't mean watching horror in general, but watching and (I admit) enjoying such a comprehensively disreputable piece of cinema. After all, I could have been catching up with good cinema, for which, say, Tarkovsky might be taken as exemplary – serious, intense, spiritually elevating and now, thanks to

**“ Bloodsucking Freaks is a bad object if ever there was one, a toxic event from which nothing good could come ”**

DVD and online streaming, easily accessible. Yet, much as I love *Solaris* (1972) and *Stalker* (1979), they lack whatever it is that appeals in seeing brains get sucked out. While I am middle class and pretentious enough to make a preening virtue of my contrary taste choice, *Bloodsucking Freaks* is surely a bad object if ever there

was one, a toxic event from which nothing good could come. Picketed, understandably, in the 1970s

by the feminist group, Women Against Violence, it's the sort of film Patrick Bateman might re-watch with the same avidity and for much the same reason as *Body Double* (1984): "I reread *Body Double* because I want to watch it again tonight even though I know I won't have enough time to masturbate over the scene where the woman is getting drilled to death by a power drill."<sup>ii</sup> Liking that kind of film raises key issues about the pleasures of exploitation and trash (after all, 'child pornography' has its cultists too). Yet, while scarcely an American psycho, I not only like such trash but prefer it in some ways; and loving trash and loving that I love it is part of who I am.

This piece is about being what I'll call a 'trash aesthete' – one who finds pleasure, solace, and an identity in trash, who is a connoisseur of the low in preference to the ordinary. Cultists' relation to trash includes not just watching and caring about the films but accumulating both related memorabilia (posters, press books, special edition DVDs) and facts about their production and meanings. I can hardly claim to be a representative trash aesthete,

but using one's own tastes and history as a fan is a starting point – especially because there is something different about being a British trash fan.<sup>iii</sup>

## 2

So what is trash? *Bloodsucking Freaks* combines most of the key elements in exemplary fashion – an exploitation film, low-budget, transgressive, overlooked and disregarded. It is without redeeming virtues beyond its extremity and shamelessness, which recommend it to cultists. Shabbily made, it deliberately set out to offend, though its grindhouse audience presumably lapped it up and cultists later embraced it precisely because it was offensive. Not all trash is so gleefully unpleasant. Indeed you can include worthless rubbish generally under the umbrella of trash – from big budget nonsense like the latest Hollywood blockbuster, or some trivial kids' film, to reality TV such as *Big Brother*. Most of contemporary culture is in this sense trash – unpretentious, disposable and vapid – and I'm happy to admit I'd much rather watch Ben Dover's *Royal Reamers 2* (2002) than *The X Factor*. What especially attracts cult interest in trash, however, is the aggressively low-brow, which is so low-brow as to be effectively oppositional.

Trash does sometimes overlap with art house, as with *A Serbian Film* (Srdjan Spasojevic, 2010), and in fact much trash is less transgressive than arty trash with pretensions. Low pleasures and erotic frissons have long been associated with art films, historically often marketed as sexy foreign fare.<sup>iv</sup> The more extreme exploitation films come across as a sort of alternative avant-garde, with a similar battery of bourgeois-baiting effects to films designed for very different audiences, such as *L'Age d'Or* (Luis Buñuel, 1930), the films of the Vienna Actionists, or Stan Brakhage's alarming autopsy footage epic, *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*



Still from A Serbian Film

(1971). Trash aesthetes habitually have a taste equally for the low and the high, both distant from the middlebrow; and a taste for trash exploitation and Tarkovsky, neither of them multiplex fodder, actually makes perfect sense.

The cult of trash has a surprisingly high-brow history, reflecting just that intellectual preference for the esoteric and rebarbative over the mainstream. Sometimes it is in a spirit of democratic identification with the working class Other from whom the audiences for exploitation were drawn; sometimes it is more like outright cultural slumming. From the Surrealists' enthusiasm for the lively semiotic chaos of bad films to the Cahiers critics who championed Sam Fuller and film noir to contemporary academics applying Deleuzian theory to horror films, films tagged as trash have found a reception among middle class intellectuals, who were far from the intended audience. Film culture has been constructed through the ongoing reclamation of trash and the elevation of the low above the mainstream, and cultists have been instrumental in this process. Not all cultists and not all cults have focused on trash, of course. There are cultists of specific films, such as *Withnail and I* (Bruce Robinson, 1987) and *The Big Lebowski* (Joel Coen, 1998), which are quirky but



Still from Body Double

Still from *Come Play With Me*

hardly trash, and even *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) has been claimed for cult because of its intense fan base. But exploitation, the hardcore of trash, is a field unthinkable now except in terms of its cult following and the work of reclamation done by fans, critics and intellectuals with an agenda of resisting the 'mainstream' and rescuing films by claiming they're subversive, transgressive and other terms that to sceptical readers might seem like weasel words to legitimate otherwise irredeemable movies.

Being a trash aesthete in Britain has a particular meaning and history determined by Britain's history of censorship, the not quite respect-

able position of film itself in the nation's culture, and the demonization of working class male taste, for which so much exploitation has been tailored. My book *British Trash Cinema* traces the history of British cult film fandom as it emerged as an underground taste in a repressive culture from the 1960s onwards and intersected

with native traditions of irony, camp, the absurd, and its subcultures such as glam and punk, as, most obviously, in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975). Some films became cult in the UK for local reasons. *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971), for instance, gathered cult momentum in Britain when its director withdrew it from circulation after death threats to his family. One moment stands out, though, in the creation of an energetic cult specifically for trash exploitation in Britain – the 'video nasties' panic of the early 1980s, which generated its own subculture and resistance and home-grown cults of Italian horror films on the list like *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1982) and auteurs such as Lucio Fulci. *Bloodsucking Freaks* didn't actually make it to the list of 'video nasties' in the 1980s, and seems never to have been submitted to the British Board of Film Classification. It is still unavailable in the UK, and I rather doubt the BBFC would look kindly upon it even now. But one of the reasons I, as a British trash fan, enjoyed watching it even on a degraded video copy – and here I think there is a difference from fans in the USA – is precisely that it had to be sought out and was exotic in conjuring a utopian world of obscene entertainment impossible under the BBFC's all-seeing eye. Not

**“the demonization of working class male taste, for which so much exploitation has been tailored”**

being supposed to see it enhanced the pleasure, rather childish I suppose, of circumventing the nanny state. Censor-

ship generates such cherishable frissons.

The cult of British trash films took longer to take hold in the UK. Most of the key British cult films, with rare exceptions, were in fact not trash. They certainly included horror films such as *Witchfinder General* (Michael Reeves, 1968), *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973) and much of Hammer, but only recently have exploitation films

Still from *Faces of Death*

such as the SF film *Devil Girl from Mars* (David MacDonald, 1954), the zombie biker flick *Psychomania* (Don Sharp, 1973), and softcore oddities such as *Come Play with Me* (1977) and *Mary Millington's True Blue Confessions* (1980), which tend to seem quaint and compromised next to American or continental transgressions, acquired much of a cult following in the country of their production. While British trash fans exult in seeing films banned in the UK, the cult of British trash combines memory, nostalgia, and patriotic investment in an alternative tradition of British cinema that encompasses more than heritage films, geezer gangster films, and Richard Curtis comedies.

The trash aesthete, as a species of fan, is as exclusive as any other class of cultist, and it is the rarity of the experience of trash, or banned films generally, that often gives value to the experience of it. When trash films were widely banned or unavailable in the UK it was worth tracking down *Blood Feast* (Herschell Gordon Lewis, 1963) or *Café Flesh* (Rinse Dream, 1982) or an uncut *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975) (that art/trash crossover again) and all the facts you could about them to impress one's film-loving mates. It is rather differ-

ent now. Trash films are of course more easily available even on premium priced Blu-ray as well as from downloads. It is fairly straightforward to guess why seeing banned films might be a pleasure, as it involves the delights of the forbidden. To see *A Clockwork Orange* in the 1980s I had to make do with a dubbed video picked up in a market; to see *Salò* uncut required a trip to Paris in the 1990s, where the film was screened at midnight once a week in a cinema opposite the Pompidou Centre. Now I have both films on Blu-ray. Such is the popularity of extreme trash that deliberately outrageous films are made to appeal to niche tastes, not just *Human Centipede 2* (Full Sequence) (Tom Six, 2011) but such straight-to-video atrocities as 'vomit porn' such as *Slaughtered Vornit Dolls* (Lucifer Valentine, 2006). Even more transgressive fare is available at websites such as Heavy-R, which outshock nasties such as *Faces of Death* (John Alan Schwartz, 1978). Hardcore pornography, the limit case of trash, has been legal in the UK since 2000 and while its cultists are not especially vocal they doubtless exist. The BBFC itself has got pretty lenient too; the uncut release of the vigorously misogynistic *Maniac* remake (Franck Khalfoun, 2012), for example, was

a surprise. All this makes being a cultist of trash easier than ever, but there is perhaps less pleasure and value in trash aestheticism, for one's knowledge is less easily translated into 'subcultural capital'.

## 3

In J.K. Huysmans great Decadent novel *A Rebours* (1884), generally translated as *Against Nature*, the sickly aristocratic hero, Des Esseintes, isolates himself against the vulgar modern world in a private sanctum of exquisite tastes and erotic experiments. Although ultimately comic and a failure (he ends up reverting to Catholicism), Des Esseintes is nevertheless the unlikely begetter of a certain kind of connoisseur – the aesthete whose recoil from the everyday is an elite rejection of everything in modern culture, a culture that these days, even more so than in Huysmans' time, is omnipresent, commercialised and vulgar. Better to create a private world of rare, erotic, pretentious pleasures, which the bizarre field of trash offers, than to submit to the embrace and ennui of the ordinary (not surprisingly *A Rebours* has become a singular cult novel).

Des Esseintes is a complete and compulsive highbrow snob, but he provides a model too for the discerning trash aesthete. Instead of high culture – though he may feel at home among that as well – the trash aesthete inhabits a rarefied realm of the debased, pornographic, extreme and unredeemable, from which he is protected by irony, knowingness and – in the case of the academic trash aesthete – a forbidding carapace of cultural capital, including Theory of the most abstruse kind that enables us to intellectualise rubbish without apparent bad faith.<sup>vi</sup> At a time when even the most difficult and transgressive culture is commodified and tamed by the market place, this is a perversely highbrow gesture of subjective revolt that finds in trash the resources for a curious education of the self. Much cult assumes a social enterprise or some kind of homosocial bond-

ing, but this is more an idiosyncratic and self-conscious negation of mainstream tastes (and political correctness), even if it is a negation quite widely shared (such is one of the recognised paradoxes of postmodern culture, in which so many endeavour to be different, just like everyone else and in exactly the same way).

The Other of trash cinema offers an escape from boredom into the sublimely indefensible. Every trash aesthete will have his or her own demons and hence reasons for loving trash and not all will like the same generally dislikeable films. But we can make a few guesses as to what drives our passionate delight in very bad things such as *Bloodsucking Freaks*. The pleasures of trash are what it does to you, the levels of experience, arousal, and intensity that distance one from the ordinary tedium of real life. Trash of an extreme sort – what the critic Mikita Brottman has called offensive films – may be a kind of 'body genre':

The ultimate aim of offensive films is the arousal of strong emotions in the lower body – nausea, weakness, faintness, and a loosening of bowel and bladder control – normally by way of graphic scenes featuring the by-products of bodily detritus: vomit, excrement, viscera, brain tissue, and so on.<sup>vii</sup>

This implies a phenomenology of trash that would relate the films to the abject as the psychoanalyst and theorist Julia Kristeva defined it.<sup>viii</sup> Films like *Bloodsucking Freaks* enable us to rehearse in mediated safety our reactions, both fascinated and repulsed to the point of nausea, to the traumatic experience of encountering something liminal and outside the social and cultural order. Although trash films may be grossly off-putting, they can also be seen, paradoxically, as a kind of security (or comfort) blanket – transitional objects that enable rehearsal of emotional and physical responses to the abject. They also demonstrate an ability to survive extreme

screen experiences outside the usual comfort zones. Exposing oneself to dangerous extremity is itself both challenging and sublime, allowing for what cult critics Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton call 'self-reflexive modes of performative reception in the negotiation of the phenomenal experience of moments of abjection, impurity, and grotesquerie'.<sup>ix</sup>

Trash aesthetes' ritual return to the scene of the abject is a way, both masterful and masochistic, of coping with threatening images and experiences and domesticating them through compulsive repetition. This is the pursuit, from the comfort of one's armchair in front of the TV, of the 'Dionysian', which is a feature of much cult practice and embodied in the panic-inducing Frank N. Furter, the Dionysus in drag of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.<sup>x</sup>

Thus the trash aesthete, more self-consciously than teenagers gagging at 'Two Girls One Cup', carves out a little cultural space for himself, a Psychogeographical flâneur both immersed in and safely distanced from contamination by the Other. I should emphasize that I am thinking mostly of male fans of trash – this is a gendered taste (indeed 'female trash' is more likely to connote lowbrow romances and celebrity magazines rather than horror, though women are avid fans of the genre). But the male 'paracinema' fan is archetypal, and the films he loves are often problematic, to put it mildly, in terms of gender. Exploitation films are typically 'bad' films not just in terms of style but often ethically too



Top: Still from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*  
Bottom: People react to *2 Girls 1 Cup* Video, source YouTube.com

in their perceived address to the Patrick Bateman repressed in all men. Though much of the impetus of cult came from gay fans queering texts, the contemporary cult of trash can be seen by its detractors as a straight male space of nostalgia, a zone of fantasy for those in full-on Oedipal revolt against the (feminised) mainstream. Decadent and amoral, the trash aesthete's sedentary hedonism at best allows for the articulation of an alternative set of aesthetic criteria; at worst, like that arch-aesthete Proust in his cork-lined bedroom enjoying the spectacle of starving rats goaded with pins to fight, it might suggest an anti-social, even psychotic suspension of morality – an unwitting symptom rather than ironic embrace of postmodern relativism

and its ethical deliquescence.<sup>xi</sup>

But, while deliciously melodramatic, this is actually nonsense, and not only because most trash aesthetes you're likely to meet are as mild mannered as the neurosthenic Des Esseintes. Their sedentary excursions into the perverse and extreme involve after all nothing more transgressive than watching and obsessing about bad movies. No rats, let alone women, are harmed by the trash aesthete's modest refusals of propriety and good taste. Nor are his brains sucked out by the likes of *Bloodsucking Freaks*. Indeed the pleasures, while viscerally bracing, of contemplating the unwatchable and monitoring one's quickened, pulsating awareness of the Abject in the midst of life can be sharply intellectual – a deliberate, though left-handed attempt to grasp, as a different kind of aesthete put it in 1873, "at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend".<sup>xii</sup> It just happens that, for some of us, such rare sublime intensities of ecstasy and experience are to be found in the presence of trash.

i. I.Q. Hunter, 'Trash Horror and the Cult of the Bad Film' in Harry Benshoff, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to the Horror Film*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming 2014.

ii. Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho*, London: Pan, 1991, p. 69.

iii. For an extended auto-ethnographic diagnosis of trash aestheticism, see I.Q. Hunter, 'Beaver Las Vegas! A Fanboy's Defence of Showgirls', in Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik, eds., *The Cult Film Reader*, Maidenhead and New York: Open University Press, 2007, pp. 472 – 81.

iv. See Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

v. On the video nasties, see Kate Egan, *Trash or Treasure? Censorship and the Changing Meanings of Video Nasties*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007.

vi. There is now a good deal of writing in 'Cult Studies' on the politics of this taste for trash 'paracinema', but the foundational article is Jeffrey Sconce, 'Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style', *Screen* 36.4 (1995), pp. 371- 393. My conception of the trash aesthete is more private, though, and more about the cultivation of individual taste than identifying with a subculture.

vii. Mikita Brottman, *Offensive Films*, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005, p 9.

viii. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

ix. Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton, *Cult Cinema*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, p. 106.

x. Amitai F. Aviram, 'Postmodern Gay Dionysus: Dr. Frank N. Furter', *Journal of Popular Culture* 26.3 (Winter 1992), pp. 183-92. See also Mathijs and Sexton, *Cult Cinema*, pp. 133 – 5 on the 'overworked metaphor' of the Dionysian in explaining cult.

xi. The anecdote about Proust and the rats is drawn from Mary Ann Caws, *Marcel Proust*, New York, Woodstock and London: Duckworth, 2003, p. 44.

xii. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Adam Phillips, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 152.

# Herschell Gordon Lewis Interview

## Abertoir Horror Festival (Aberystwyth, UK: 8 November 2009)

Mikel Koven



*I started the interview asking Herschell Gordon Lewis about his reputation in books like The Golden Turkey Awards, where he is ranked by the Medved brothers as a candidate for one of the worst directors ever.*

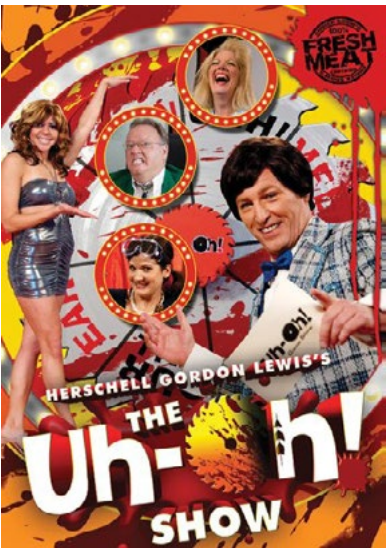
**HGL:** No, I know what they're talking about. And I've had that throughout my career. The question is how

dare he make a movie so schlocky, so cheap, so lacking in talent, that people go to see [it]?

**MJK:** That's right.

**HGL:** And here are these multi-million dollar movies, that are loaded with talent and with resources. And money behind them. And people don't go to see them. So the trick is not to – I don't think I've ever

made a movie that critics liked. Which means what they've got to do is change critics. Because we live on the periphery of this business. And I don't expect this movie – like *Harry Potter* which opened in seventeen hundred theatres the same day – I'd be very pleased if it opened in one theatre on the same day. But the idea is, in my opinion, a com-



combination of entertainment and being able to make a few – just a few – quid out of it. And you cannot do that if you overspend, and you cannot do that if you over estimate, what somebody is going to want to pay to either rent a DVD or go to see.

And I sat here – and here we really have, as you saw, its not quite finished: there are dead spots in the sound – we're going to fix that, there are slight gaps in the conversation – no big deal. This is a first cut. You really are in our cutting room looking at this. And of course, there are no titles and there is no music. And sometimes when Radial Saw Rex starts his saw, the sound goes dead – don't worry about it. When that thing goes into Oscar's head there will be a big clang when it fi-

nally stops dead, because it hits his brain or something. That's not in there yet. And yet, I saw some reactions here that really pleased me. ... I won't call it semi-finished, let's call it three-quarters finished movie.

I've also sat in screening rooms, where big productions with big names were on the screen, and I saw heads going this way [nodding off] and I saw people were walking out. Constantly. And I saw at the tail end sort of an apathy. As crappy as my stuff is, it's not viewed with apathy. It may be viewed with hatred, it may be viewed with scorn, it may be viewed with pleasure, but never with apathy. So, that's my answer.

**MJK:** Would you consider yourself as a 'cult director'?

**HGL:** Yes ... it would depend on what the cult is. It sounds very exotic, doesn't it? [When] ...we started this strange ... strange sequence, yes it was a cult. We've expanded since then. The early audiences were not like this. They were all-male ... I don't think there was anybody in that theatre under 40. That was our group. In fact, people over age 50, think I should have been strung up on a wire. They still think that, I guess. But it was ... it was a cult. It's become mainstream. I credit some of the major

companies for that, because they started to make the same kind of movie, with resources I didn't have, and they made it much more fashionable to view this kind of movie. So now you talk about a splatter film, are you talking about one like this [*The Uh-oh Show*], or are you talking about a major company picture, like a *Scream* or a *Saw* or something of that sort. It could be any of the above, and therefore, it is no longer a 'cult'. It's not certainly the same thing as a big splashy thing. It does draw a respectable and varied audience. And when you draw a respectable and varied audience, it's not a cult.

So, what started as a cult, as Christianity did – I wouldn't compare this really ... maybe with Al-Qaida ...

**MJK:** You're known, particularly by this audience, as a horror director.

**HGL:** Wait, what's that word?

**MJK:** Horror. Horror.

**HGL:** Oh, horror. OK.

**MJK:** Well, that's actually a nice segue...

**HGL:** What???

**MJK:** Before you made *Blood Feast*, you made some a few of the 'nudie cutie' films.

**HGL:** Yes.

**MJK:** And I'm not sure if people are familiar with this ...

**HGL:** I'm delighted they



aren't.

**MJK:** Could you elaborate ...

**HGL:** See the whole idea, in the movie world, is – now some of you folks were here yesterday to hear my diatribe on how to make an independent – how I make independent movies. And the trick is one of taking a business-like position. It's not a matter of 'I like this' and 'I'm projecting what I like'. Or, 'I'm some sort of a lecher, and oh boy, I get my jollies from making this kind of a movie.' You either follow or develop a sequence. An [in] the early days, the kind of motion picture that some

theatres on the periphery might play (not mainstream again), that major companies weren't making, were of that genre. Later on, when everybody began pouring in – See that's what happens: I'm a trend-creator. If they start to pour in, then I go somewhere else. It's like a travelling crap game.

Now this movie [*The Uh-oh Show*], the intention of it, as you can see, is to wed two kinds of movies: one is the traditional splatter film, because you have to have blood gushing. And the other is a conventional, or unconventional, comedy. So the whole idea here, as

you see, people don't die. Cut the girl's arm off, ok, so what? She's still there. In a typical – as Hansel and Gretel are getting torn to pieces, they're still Hansel and Gretel. And the audiences will get it, I hope. And if they don't get it, so much the better. And if the critics hate this picture, it's all to the good.

I recall, for example, I'll tell you a story out of school. I made a movie called *The Gore, Gore Girls*. This is a long time ago. But it was after the major companies had begun to get into this business. And I said it's time to get out. Again, like a crap game, you know when



to get out. ... So I made a movie called *The Gore, Gore Girls*. It was, and again, I'm sort of anticipating this, it was a kind of parody, really. And in Australia, the movie played very well for about 30 years. After 30 years of showing in theatres, and selling thousands and thousands of videocassettes and DVDs, they banned it. Which I thought was a big hoot. Because I began to get phone calls and emails saying 'come on down here and let's have some kind of seminar'. On what? But after 30 years, they banned it. It's like someone looking at a corpse and saying 'hey, you've got cancer'. It's a little late for that.

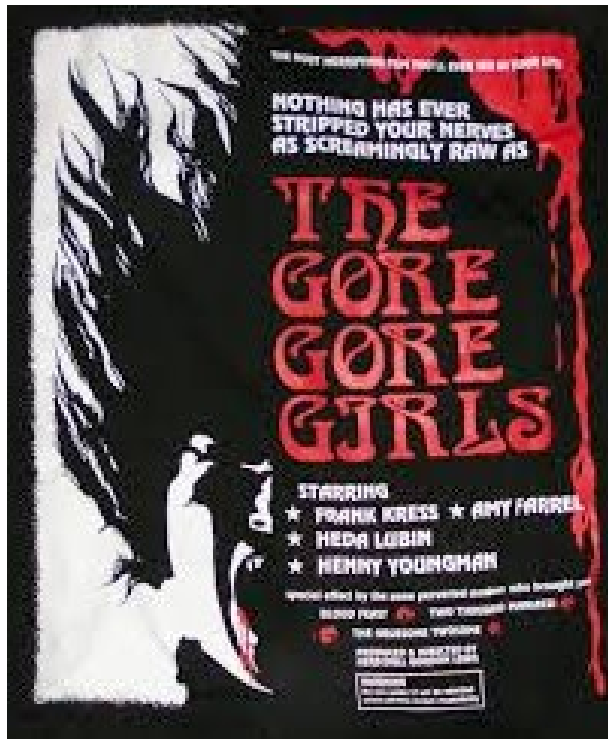
So, if you enjoy what you do, and can survive doing it, do it! But don't do just because somebody says you're an Ed Wood, or you are making the kind of movie that I don't want to see.

**MJK:** Fair enough. Let's open this up and do people have questions out there?

**HGL:** They don't dare.

**Audience Question 1:** I remember seeing you quoted as saying, you're partially inspired by the Grand Guignol in Paris. ... Is that true, and if so, did you ever actually go to Paris and see any of the original performances?

**HGL:** Are you suggesting that I'm that old? What

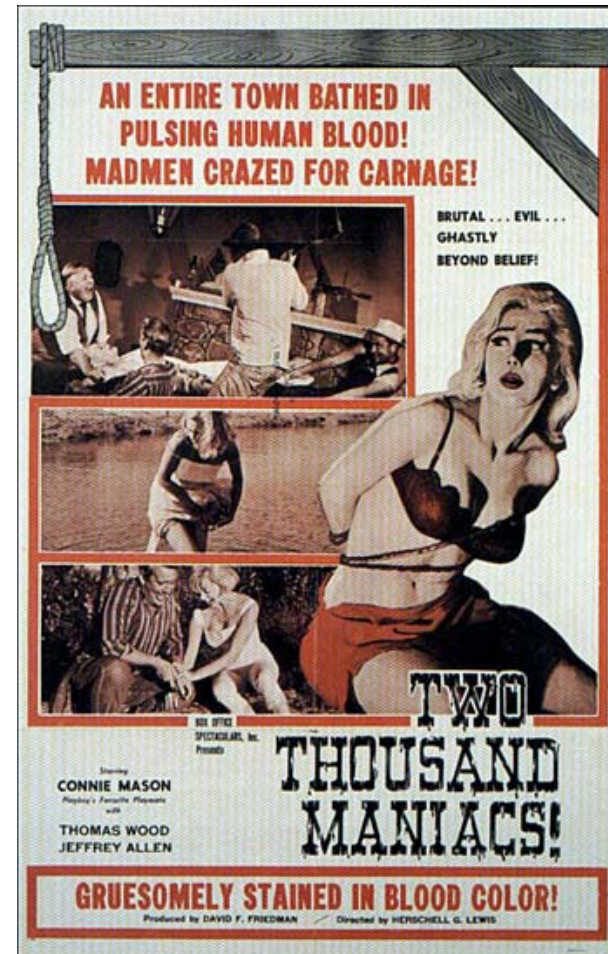


I had seen, and as you know ... or maybe you do, I'm a Francophile. ... If I don't get to Paris - well, it's not me, it's my wife - if we don't get to Paris at least twice a year, she goes into convulsions. The Grand Guignol, as you know, expired right around World War Two. It's an old show.

**Audience Question 1:** It was actually a year before *Blood Feast* was made. ... It was 1962.

**HGL:** '62? Was it was that late? All I ever saw of it, of course it was famous in my little world. I saw an illegal movie shot during a

performance of the Grand Guignol. The result of that was that I opened a little theatre in Chicago, which we called the Blood Shed. We would show old horror movies, such as the original *Dracula* with Bela Lugosi, and between reels, we'd stop the movie, and two people would come out and one would slit the throat of the other and drag him off and the movie would start again. The popularity of that is what really drove me. So yes, the Grand Guignol was my master, and considering the whole concept to start with, be-



cause after they folded, there was nothing. I didn't know they ran until 1962.

**Audience Question 1:** It's just a really nice coincidence.

**HGL:** It's a lovely coincidence. I'm glad I'm still here and they aren't.

**Audience Question 2:** What did you think of the remake of *2000 Maniacs*?

**HGL:** That's a wrong question. Here is the prob-

lem: some people don't make movies, they give birth. I always ... if you attack the movie, "you're attacking my child!" I've always taken a much more patrician position than that. As I think many of you know, I don't own these, I don't own my old movies anymore. I own a piece of this one [*The Uh-oh Show*] but I don't own the old movies. The person who does, who

lives in California, which as you know is a different planet, he called me up one day and says "Guess what? These guys want to remake *2000 Maniacs*." Now of all the movies I've made that I did not want remade, that's one. Because that is my personal favourite of all the movies. I said "Please, tell them to remake *The Wizard of Gore*, but not that." Which somebody did, by the way. He says "No, they want to make *2001 Maniacs*". Now *2001 Maniacs*, as it turns out, was directed by a very bright kid by the name of Tim Sullivan. And he was occasionally in touch with me. And I still own, after all these years, I still own the music, from many of these movies - Why? Because I wrote it. Why did I write it? Because I didn't want to pay anybody. See, that's how easy the mathematics are. Why am I on the screen in this picture [*The Uh-oh Show*]? Because they wanted some sort of host and I didn't want to pay anybody. I should have made a better deal, shouldn't I?

So out comes *2001 Maniacs*, and my question was why did they bother licensing the rights? It's a totally different movie. Whether it's good or bad is not for me to judge, but it's a totally different movie. If they're going to make a dif-

ferent movie, let them call it something else. Now that doesn't quite answer your question, but you're getting my drift. Instead of a bunch of Yankees coming, they got a bunch of kids. I must admit to you, he sent me a DVD, but I didn't watch it all the way through.

**Audience Question 3:** After *The Gore, Gore Girls* you stopped making films for quite a long time. Why did you start to get back into it?

**HGL:** Why did I start to get back into it? Because they torture you, that's why. I decided to get back into it and I'll tell you why. Over a period of years, and I mean years, I would get phone calls and then later on emails, as our whole society sophisticated itself, saying let's make *Blood Feast 2*. And it happened so often, I developed a defence mechanism: I said "put your deal together and call me." And that got rid of them. Until one day, a guy called me and said, "yeah, put your deal together and call me". He put his deal together and he called me. Now *Blood Feast 2*, they hired me as a director. It was not my cast, it was not my crew, and more to the point, it was not my script. I did it, because, making movies, as I think some of you guys know, is like having malaria. You think you're over it, and

... its lurking in your blood stream. So when they offered me that opportunity to direct *Blood Feast 2*, even though it wasn't my script, and it wasn't my cast, and it wasn't my crew, I said yes. And I had a wonderful time. Because I sat

in a director's chair. I was the director. I had an assistant director. And instead of fixing the lights and picking up the cables at the end of the night, I had people who did that. I had no idea what their titles were. To this day I see credits on the screen, I don't know what they do. What is a unit manager? I don't know. I give people credit for that title, what the heck, but I don't know what they do.

So, in the shooting of that picture was a combination of being exhilarating and being frustrated. Because it was not my movie. And the result of that was, was that after we finished that movie, I said "Hey, I got to make one more of my own." And that was the genesis of what was



originally called "Grim Fairy Tales" and is now called *The Uh-Oh Show*. It was simply the malaria lurked up again.

**Audience Question 4:** In the movie we just saw [*The Uh-Oh Show*], there was a reference to *The Gore, Gore Girls*. Are there any other references in the movie to other films that you have done or other movies that you appreciate ...

**HGL:** No, the only one other than that is *Blood Feast*. And it's in the same speech by Fred Finagler, the producer. It was sort of an in-joke. It astounds me, really, the number of people who have seen this junk. I was in Milan, Italy. We were sitting in something like this. And the questions were in Italian. The trans-



lator would translate into English, and I would give an answer and he'd translate it back into Italian. And what did they show that night, in that theatre? They showed *2000 Maniacs* in English. And on came this sing-song beginning, and about half the audience joined in. They knew it by heart. I said, "Great heavens, I'm more global than I thought."

So when you look at our strange little industry, it's really a source of pride that we have survived this long. And the result of that was, we threw those two lines into the script of *The Uh-Oh Show* figuring some people will understand it, some people will just think it's a line of dialogue.

**Audience Question 5:**

Was *The Uh-Oh Show* your last film, or do you have more planned?

**HGL:** My last film? You mean my next one will be posthumous? It is the last film as of now. Someone says to you, "do you have a script?" Everyone has a script. Eve-

ry cab driver in Los Angeles has a script on the chair next to him. Yes I have a script and it's called "Mr. Bruce and the Gore Machine". But, I have been threatened with death domestically if I finance this movie myself. So if somebody here has a big wad of money, and wants to produce "Mr. Bruce and the Gore Machine", I can start shooting this ... it's now 11:00 ... So the answer is I don't know. Chances are, it may well be my grand finale, but I don't know. I'm still somewhat in advance of Alzheimer's. And so that means I'm available.

**Audience Question 6:** I was wondering about two things really. One is, with the amount of gore you put in your films, are you

ever squeamish around real blood or anything?

**HGL:** Well, I try to get in a bottle if I can. I'm not squeamish around real blood... I'm not a gore-hound. I'm in the film business, and this kind of movie is the kind of movie which has given me, I won't say fame ... notoriety. I'm not squeamish, but I don't seek it out. People drive by an accident."Is there a body there?" "Is he bleeding?" I don't take that point of view.

**Audience Question 6 [continuing]:** are there any new directors you are really interested in these days?

**HGL:** New directors? I don't know the answer to that question. Because I'm not a gore-hound. I've never seen a *Scream* - Oh, wait, I've seen the first one. That's right. We're lucky. We subscribe to a deal in the US, that's called Netflix. You have a similar thing, I know, in the UK. And they send you rotating movies by mail. We're on a five movie basis. So at any given time I can have five to one movie in the house, depending on how many we've sent back. I saw the first *Scream*, about 20 minutes of it, and sent it back. I have never seen one of the *Saw* movies. I've never seen the sequel to any "House on Elm Street" (sic). Or any *Amityville Horror*. So I don't know who

is doing what. Really, I'm not mainstream enough to draw that conclusion. All I know is what I see and hear within the trade about some of these movies. And I as I told you [me, in an earlier conversation], they are derivative. You feel you're seeing the same thing over and over again. As I said the other night, some of you folks were here the other night [when HGL gave a seminar on independent cinema], don't title your movie Such and Such 2. Such and Such 3. Such and Such 4. Because it give the audience immediately the feeling that they've seen it before. But I have no answer for you, because I don't know. I'm just too ignorant of what's going on in the business.

**MJK:** So which filmmakers do you like?

**HGL:** Which filmmakers do I like? Who did *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903?

**MJK:** Porter.

**HGL:** Very good! Edwin Porter. That's amazing. Which filmmakers do I like? I like Spielberg. I think he has guts. He will make movies like *Schindler's List*, nobody else would have made that movie. Now nobody else had the money to make that movie. Which is also a help. But I admire people who will take a chance on an idea that somebody will go and to see. Not just

take a chance on an idea. Because that's just too egoistic. But to take a chance on a movie that somebody might go and see. But that's my kind of director. Or my kind of producer. Or my kind of organizer.

**Audience Question 7:** Would you shoot on digital again?

**HGL:** Oh you bet! I would shoot no other way from this point forward.

**Audience Question 7:** If money wasn't an issue?

**MJK:** Money is always an issue!

**HGL:** If someone says we're going to shoot on 35mm film, I'll say "God bless, ya! I'll be there". But that would not be my decision. My decision now, and I'm quite confident that even four or five years from now, it will be everybody's decision. If you shoot digitally – and I don't mean with this kind of a camera – we shot this [*The Uh-oh Show*] with two cameras called RED. Which is the newest – and the cameras are gigantic. They're monstrous cameras, but the quality on the screen, in my opinion, is not only comparable to 35[mm], but at least – sometimes, it's better. All this CGI stuff is really computerized. Computers don't have film going through them. So, it's digital with is then converted to film. But aside from eve-

rything else, at our kind of level, you can get so much more film, so much more finished product, for the same amount of money. It's a laughable situation. I had no dream going in that we'd be able to accomplish the amount of shooting we did in the period of time and budget we had. And had we been on film, there's another problem: you ruin a take, what do you do? With *Blood Feast*, there was no question, use it anyway. As I said, there were two words you never heard on my set: "Take Two". With this, so what? You're on tape, you're not on film. You're not wasting it. And on a budget level, that's a big, big issue. But even with major company product, a lot of it, is coming out now shot digitally. That is the future. And then there are theatres getting their image off of satellite. You can't get film off satellite. You get an electronic image. You might as well say the future is here, let's stick to it, rather than saying "tradition tells me and I'm comfortable with, the other medium". I offer that as opinion, not as fact. And I thank you all for sitting through this. You're my kind of people: nutcases!

## On Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*:

### Or what happens when the Art House is Seduced by the Grind House

Greg Scorzio



Imagine a film that opens with a group of five skinny naked women with unusually large breasts tied in chains to a set of crucifixes. The setting is a poorly lit and fake looking medieval dungeon. The women look like they are in their early 20's. The cinematography looks like what you would expect on an American soap opera from the late 1970's. A poorly mixed synth composition plays on the sound track, sounding vaguely like a bad imitation of a John Carpenter score. The image then cuts to a badly framed wide shot of five evil nuns entering the dungeon

with stern looks on their faces. The naked crucifix women look scared. With a ridiculous transitioning effect that looks like the product of a cheap editing program, the image dissolves to an overhead shot of the nuns looking up at the camera with a malevolent sneer. All of the nuns look (improbably) like they are between 25 and 30. Each of the five nuns stands in front of the five nude women. The nuns disrobe and (surprise surprise!) reveal athletic, perfectly sculpted bodies with slightly smaller breasts than the women hanging in front of them. The synth composition quickly

morphs into a rock instrumental that sounds like a demo track from a home recording software package from the early 90's. The naked nuns kneel down in front of the crucifix women and proceed to perform oral sex on them. We see tight close ups of very real tongues entering very real (albeit surgically enhanced) vaginas. The film then cuts to very fake looking performances of feigned sexual arousal on

**“ If the bad taste tastes good, the porn film is happy to feed the audience the cinematic equivalent of sugarcoated lard ”**

the faces of the crucifix women. Here, the acting and the filmmaking are both extremely poor. Yet this is still the moment where the film becomes effective at achieving its aims. The poor taste of the film's imagery and the extreme crappiness of the film's production values are what strangely drive the extremely visceral reaction it wants in its audience. This is a porn film after all. If the bad taste tastes good, the porn film is happy to feed the audience the cinematic equivalent of sugarcoated lard.

The exploitation film employs a similar strategy. To understand how, imagine a second film that opens just like the first. We have the same bad cinematography, the same cheesy music, and the same embarrassingly bad acting. However, in this second film, the nuns are middle aged fat women. Instead of undressing in front of the crucifix women, the nuns stand in front of them, slowly pulling out scary black blowtorches from the insides of their black outfits. They proceed to sadistically burn off the breasts of the hanging crucifix women. The screen image cuts to close ups of fake looking syrupy blood trickling down nubile pink legs. The nuns begin chanting, "Rivers of gore, sluts no more! The circle of sin starts from within!" The

nuns kneel down and begin to perform oral sex on the crucifix women. There is no oral sex money shot. Instead we see screaming bloody faces. At the moment the crucifix women simultaneously reach orgasm, one of the nuns pulls a lever on the floor. A series of trap doors open. The

chains release the women from the crucifixes and their screaming, bloody bodies drop into a vat

of acid. The film cuts to a shot of the acid bubbling as a cheesy base sounds warbles on the hissy soundtrack. Despite the extremity of the imagery, the filmmaking and production values are in this second film so bad that the film teeters between being shocking and unintentionally funny.

This is, after all, an exploitation movie. Like the porn film before it, the aim of this film is to produce an intense psychological reaction in the audience. The reaction aimed for is a particularly powerful "ewww" in the audience's gut. This "ewww" can be accompanied, like the porn film, with a combination of laughter and arousal. One can laugh at the poor construction of the film. One can be aroused by the cruelty. But what the viewer is not encouraged to do is think something like the following: "I am disturbed because I think it's horrendous that nuns would trap women in a dungeon and commit acts of sexual violence against them before killing them in a way that shows both extremely inhumane cruelty and a lack of respect for their human dignity. This film is disturbing because it is extremely tragic." Such thoughts would, in effect, ruin the cinematic experience the exploitation film is aiming to create in its audience. Like the porn film, the exploitation film wants you

to have a visceral good time. But unlike the porn film, it is not merely bad taste and explicit sex that the exploitation film uses to pop its nifty reactions from an audience. The exploitation film is primarily using violence, sadism and cruelty to create its unique audience effect.

This effect depends on the exploitation film enabling its audience to shield itself from certain aspects of the world. It obviously wants its audience to see the cruelty and degradation that the exploitation film puts on the screen. But it doesn't want the audience to see the things about cruelty and degradation that would make the audience feel pangs of moral disapproval and disgust. The disgust the film is aiming for in the audience should be fun. The "ewww" in the audience's gut has to feel more like falling down the slope of a roller coaster than the after math of contemplating human pathos. The exploitation film is thus willing to give up the prospect of illuminating its subject matter in exchange for giving us a good time. In this, the exploitation film and the porn film are cinematic twin sisters titillating different human drives. During the successful porn film, the audience must be titillated and then aroused.

During the successful exploitation film, the audience can have a much wider array of visceral reactions. It can be entertained, titillated, aroused, revolted, or amused. Yet it cannot have evaluative reactions to the subject matter on the screen. Evaluative reactions to a film are those reactions where an audience can evaluate the quality of the ideas the subject matter of a film presents to the audience. Films that don't

distract the audience from these ideas facilitate such evaluative reactions. With such films, the clarity of the audience's thought is not hindered by an attempt to give the audience a visceral good time. The visceral good time comes from appreciating the skill with which the film honestly and unsparingly shows us its content (with all of the implications of that content in full view).

It's important to note that at the moment, talking about evaluative film viewing may make fans of edgy cinema feel uneasy. This is because evaluating involves assessing the value of things. Assessing the value of things is an inherently ethical activity. If there is anything that makes fans of edgy cinema feel uncomfortable these days, it is any discussion of the role of ethics in film assessment. This discomfort stems from social conservatives having largely distorted the public conception of what the ethical demands on both films and film viewing must be. Such ethical demands are often presumed to include a commitment to being outraged by any film that showcases a representation of unethical behavior. But this is a caricature of what demands ethics actually makes

**“ The exploitation film is thus willing to give up the prospect of illuminating its subject matter in exchange for giving us a good time ”**

on cinema. Ethics only really demands two things from cinema: (1) That no one should be hurt either during the making or watching of

a film and (2) The aesthetic quality of a film depends on it not shielding the audience from its subject matter. (1) is fairly obvious and requires no defense. In defense of (2), all we need note is that all the best critically acclaimed films from *Citizen Kane* (1941) to *The Master* (2012) have in

common a commitment to exposing their subject matter to their audiences. Such critically acclaimed cinema may make us uncomfortable. But it never tries to distance us from potential discomfort to entertain us. Such films exhibit a tacit acknowledgement of all the features of any situation they present their audiences with.

If they present an audience with a gruesome murder, they (at least) tacitly acknowledge that murder is both wrong and tragic. Such

honesty is what enables quality cinema to illuminate the world. For all their elaborate and far-fetched fantasy, films must ultimately be truthful. They can't try and convince us that Jews are evil, sexism is good, or that hurting others is fun. Of course, films can show us characters that believe such things. Such characters may even be sympathetic in certain respects. But such characters can't be right about these beliefs. A film that tries to convince us they are right is telling just as much of a lie as the worst *Daily Mail* columns and *Fox News* media.

The exploitation film deliberately tries to lie to its audience. This is why for any exploitation film to work, the viewer can only laugh or gasp or be titillated by representations of lurid and gruesome content. What the exploitation audience can't do is start to reflect on the film's content because it is disturbed by its own revulsion, laughter, or arousal. If the audience starts to do this without this cognitive process ruining the enjoyment of the film, the audience knows it's not watching an exploitation film. The audience is instead watching an art film. Like the exploitation film, the art film can present the audience

with representations of extreme sadism, violence or sex. It can make the audience laugh, gasp, or feel aroused at such representations. But unlike the exploitation film, the art film will allow for complex psychological reactions that happen when an audience reflects on a film's subject matter and its psychological reactions to that

**“ What the exploitation audience can't do is start to reflect on the film's content because it is disturbed by its own revulsion ”**

subject matter. The art film won't, in virtue of what it is, try and shield its audience from features of its subject matter

so as to keep the audience entertained. Nor will the art film try and shield the audience from reflecting on itself.

Perhaps the most enthusiastic pop culture champion of exploitation cinema is movie buff and film-director Quentin Tarantino. Tarantino's veneration of exploitation cinema at first seems odd, since Tarantino first rose to prominence in the 1990s on the crest of a (then) new wave of American art house filmmakers. Tarantino's first three films (*Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Jackie Brown*) were important turning points in the history of art house cinema. With these early works, Tarantino demonstrated, perhaps more than any filmmaker of his generation, that the genre film in the hands of a talented filmmaker could be both the most commercial and the most edgy kind of cinema. The 90s films of Tarantino have in common a surprising lack of affinity with the aesthetics of exploitation cinema. Although Tarantino had always been a fan of exploitation cinema, his early films are very much art house (rather than exploitation) appropriations of the crime film. This is, in part, because they utilize a number of storytelling devices that illuminate their subject matter

for the audience. They don't simply entertain the audience. The kaleidoscopic temporal chronology of *Pulp Fiction* induces the audience to reflect on the doomed future of the life of criminality. If the chronology had been linear, the audience would have only been given the very literal message that crime was dangerous for the characters in the film. More famously, the non-plot furthering dialogue of *Reservoir Dogs* and *Jackie Brown* induces the audience to reflect on the three-dimensionality of its criminal characters. In pre-Tarantino crime cinema, such criminals were normally archetypal to the point of being stereotypical. Tarantino turned this convention on its head. By making his criminals hyper-articulate and slightly bohemian, Tarantino made them feel as though their lives had a reality outside the films in which they appeared. The pop culture references in *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, and *Jackie Brown* also induced the audience to think about the relationship between the criminality portrayed on the screen and the wider mainstream culture from which Tarantino's fictional criminals

emerged. In these ways, Tarantino's early films were and are powerful precisely because of how clever they are in honestly illuminating what they show us.

After a six-year absence, Tarantino returned to the silver screen in 2003 and 2004 with *Kill Bill Volume 1* and *Volume 2*. Both films are an elaborate homage to martial arts flicks, B-movies, and exploitation cinema. Unlike Tarantino's previous three films, the *Kill Bill* films do not try to re-invent their genre (the samurai-revenge thriller) by infusing it with cinematic techniques designed to induce the audience to look at the genre's subject matter in a new way. Their only formal innovation is a TV commercial influenced visual aesthetic combined with a constant stream of thematic and visual references to other films. The one respect in which the *Kill Bill* films differentiate themselves from some (although not all) samurai-revenge thrillers is in their complete indifference to the ethics of violence and revenge. When either violence or the subject matter of revenge is used throughout either film, Tarantino encourages the audience to respond with





the simple psychological reactions aimed at by exploitation cinema. Because Tarantino is a great filmmaker, the violence in both films is often thought provoking. Yet because Tarantino is trying so hard to achieve the aims of exploitation cinema, he has to come up with devices to get the audience to ignore the thoughts he may have accidentally provoked.

*Kill Bill Volume 1* tells the story of Beatrix Kiddo, a trained assassin (played with steely intensity by Uma Thurman) who is taking revenge on a group of her colleagues by using martial arts to systematically kill them. Her revenge is motivated by a massacre in which her fellow assassins attempted to murder Beatrix, her husband, and all their friends and relatives at a wedding dress rehearsal. The film begins with a brutal black and white sequence in which Bill (the leader of the gang and the one responsible for ordering the hit) tells Beatrix that the massacre is not an act of sadism on his part. Instead, he says, it is an act of masochism. As she is about to tell him that she is pregnant with his baby, Bill coldly shoots her in the head. The credits roll. Bill is played by David Carradine, star of the 1970's American

TV series *Kung Fu*. Carradine's position in pop culture is one of the many in-jokes of the *Kill Bill* movies. However, his delicately controlled and complex performance stops his presence in the film from being a tongue in cheek homage to martial arts media from another era. Bill is fascinating in a way that makes him more than a broad stroked villain. Uma Thurman's Beatrix is fascinating because she seems like a contradiction. On the one hand she appears like a cold-blooded assassin who could easily occupy the position of a sociopathic antagonist in any thriller. But on the other hand, her actions are motivated by an anger that stems from an emotional wound. She was deprived by the massacre of a chance to love a man and child within a stable nuclear family. Yet her behavior throughout the film suggests that such love on her part would be impossible. The immediacy of each character's screen charisma at the beginning of *Volume 1* suggests that the saga will explore the strange pathologies that make both of them such compelling viewing. What actually happens is that the saga uses various devices to try and induce its audience NOT to explore these pathologies.



After the opening credits of *Volume 1*, we see Beatrix entering the Pasadena home of Vernita Green, a woman who was part of the assassination squad responsible for the wedding massacre. The sequence opens with what looks like a parody of 1970's fight sequences. A fast moving zoom in on the eyes of both women immediately precedes the fighting. 70's style martial arts music blares on the soundtrack. Beatrix and Vernita quickly engage in a mid-air post-matrix style kung fu fight that gets dramatically interrupted by the presence of Vernita's four year old daughter Nikki. In a comically absurd moment, both women go from trying to kill each other to pretending (for the sake of Nikki) that they are old friends having a discussion. Once Vernita's daughter leaves the room, Vernita gives a half-hearted apology to Beatrix for the wedding massacre and insists that because of Nikki she has become a different person. Beatrix responds that although she will not murder Vernita in front of her child, she still intends to kill Vernita at a later time of Vernita's choosing. Beatrix insists quite coldly that she has no sympathy for Vernita and that Vernita's choice to have a

child does nothing to undermine the good reasons Beatrix has for killing her. Vernita attempts to shoot Beatrix with a gun hidden in a cereal box. She misses, giving Beatrix enough time to throw a kitchen knife into Vernita's chest. Seconds after Vernita's violent death, Nikki walks into the room, staring at both Beatrix and her dead mother's corpse.

In one of the most casually cringy moments in all of 00's cinema, Beatrix says to the child, "It was not my intention to do this in front of you. For that, I'm sorry. But you can take my word for it. Your mother had it coming. If when you grow up, you still feel raw about it, I'll be waiting." What makes this scene particularly disturbing is just how casually Beatrix addresses a small child whose mother she has just murdered. Although the murder was (unexpectedly) an act of self-defense, Beatrix shows a cold indifference to the life-changing trauma she has just inflicted on this child. The fact that Nikki will be spending her life dealing with the psychological aftermath of witnessing her mother's murder isn't something which Beatrix takes much interest in. The only effort at consolation that Beatrix makes is



to tell Nikki that if she desires, she can try and murder Beatrix when she grows up. Beatrix then walks out of Vernita's home with the self-satisfied swagger of a Clint Eastwood character in a Spaghetti Western. She leaves the child staring at her dead mother on the floor.

What makes this scene particularly disturbing is not what happens in it. It is the way the film tries to get the audience to experience and interpret this scene. The film goes through great pains to thrill the audience with the nearly gymnastic fight sequence. The film gets the audience to laugh at the casualness with which both female assassins deal with the issue of an impending murder in front of a small child. The film disturbs the audience with the way Beatrix reacts to a child witnessing the bloody aftermath of the murder of her own mother. All of these elements juxtaposed against one and other initially produces a thought provoking experience for the audience. It initially looks as though the film is exposing the connections between the mindset of archetypical movie assassins and child abuse. Yet as the rest

of the film demonstrates, it is uninterested in exploring any of these issues. Beatrix's exit from Vernita Green's home is meant only to make Beatrix look like a powerful and tough anti-hero. The scene itself makes Beatrix appear objectively like a villain. Yet the film does all it can to entertain the audience (through revulsion, titillation, excitement, and humor) so intensely that the audience can ignore how awful and pointless Beatrix's quest for revenge is. The film desperately wants the audience to just enjoy her.

The more entertaining Beatrix and her quest is, the more entertaining she is to watch. The more entertaining the film can make her, the easier it is to get the audience watching Beatrix to stop thinking about the ethical dimensions of anything she does. In this regards, *Volume 1* conventionally embodies the aesthetic aims of the exploitation film. However, unlike the exploitation film, the filmmaking craft and actor performances in *Volume 1* are impeccable. This creates a dilemma for Tarantino. The impeccable filmmaking and actor performances induce the au-

dience to take the subject matter of the film (violence and revenge) very seriously. When an audience takes the subject matter of a film seriously, they are induced by the film to have more than simple psychological reactions to what they see on the screen. The audience begins to think about the ethical and philosophical questions raised by the scenarios played out by the film. The audience also begins to think about its own reactions to this subject matter. This is especially true of a film where the subject matter involves the brutal and sadistic behavior of human beings. But this is exactly what Tarantino doesn't want, as it complicates the simple entertainment that *Volume 1* is aiming for. Tarantino wants to use his incredible filmmaking skill to take the audience on a wild ride. But he also has to do what he can to stop the audience from having a psychological reaction to his subject matter that is more complex than being entertained, repulsed or titillated.

The way Tarantino directs his way out of this dilemma is to first create cinematic representations of disturbing and thought provoking scenes of brutality. He then

quickly uses cinematic devices to entertain the audience so as to nullify the thinking that would make the psychological reactions of the audience too complex. This is especially true in an early sequence where we are shown Beatrix awakening from a coma in a hospital. Upon realizing where she is, she looks down at her stomach and notices that she is no longer carrying her baby. Assuming that the baby has died and has been ripped from her womb, she lets out a heart-breaking shriek. Soon afterwards, a hospital attendant named Buck enters the room and Beatrix wisely decides to pretend she has not yet awoken from her coma. Buck has brought in a friend who he allows to nightly rape Beatrix while she is unconscious.

This juxtaposition is an incredibly disturbing depiction of human tragedy and cruelty. But before this bit of tragic cruelty is allowed to settle and change the audience's perception of the subsequent scenes in the film, Tarantino tries hard to push the pleasure buttons of the audience. Beatrix quickly gets her revenge by maiming her rapist and finding ways to smash Buck's head in with a hospital door. Her



interrogation of Buck while she crushes his skull with a door is filmed with a light hearted and humorous style. The subsequent sequence shows Beatrix escaping the hospital with Buck's clothes on while quickly riding a wheel chair. 70's action movie music plays on the soundtrack. The ridiculousness of the scene initially seems like the film is being ironic. But once we see the rest of the film, it becomes clear that this isn't irony. This is just comedy.

The rest of *Volume 1* follows the same pattern. A brilliantly drawn animated sequence sets up the back-story for one of Beatrix's targets, assassin O-Ren Ishi (played by Lucy Lui). Throughout the sequence, the audience is told a brutal tale of child trauma where the young O-Ren watches her mother and father being murdered in front of her by a sadistic Yakuza boss. In the following sequence, we see O-Ren as an adolescent getting her revenge by seducing that same Yakuza boss who it turns out is a pedophile. While in bed, he allows the young girl to sit on top of his body while she surprises him by stabbing him in the chest with a sword. She forces him to look into her eyes and

remember who she is before pulling the knife from his chest. A fountain of blood bursts from his dying cartoon body as symbols of death and male orgasm co-mingle. This sequence, again, raises all sorts of issues about the nature of abuse, sex, and death. But rather than explore any of these issues, the film merely cuts to grown-up O-Ren as a stylishly dressed assassin shooting a faraway target. All the abuse depicted in the earlier sequence was designed solely to make O-Ren look like a fearsome opponent for Beatrix to face in the battle that culminates the final act of *Volume 1*.

The battle itself is exciting and well-choreographed, despite the fact that it plays more like a funny television commercial than the tense culmination of two opposing life quests. By the end of *Kill Bill Volume 1*, Beatrix's quest feels deliberately more like an amusement park ride than a mission the audience has any emotional investment in. This is where the audience is at the beginning of *Volume 2*. *Volume 2* is ostensibly a sequel that begins where *Volume 1* leaves off. But unlike *Volume 1*, *Volume 2* is a film that can only work if



it is more than a cinematic roller coaster. After all, the audience must have some emotional investment in the story in order to wish to continue its journey with the characters after *Volume 1* ends. The extent to which *Volume 1* got the audience to have fun without reflecting on what they saw kept them from being emotionally invested in Beatrix's quest. Yet the lack of emotional investment in the story is an obstacle towards the audience's engagement with *Volume 2*. Once one begins to watch *Volume 2*, it is immediately apparent that Tarantino still wants his sequel to give the audience the unreflective thrills of the exploitation film. But he also wants the engagement with audience emotions that we find in more serious cinema.

In order to satisfy these conflicting demands, Tarantino does something in *Volume 2* that exploitation films generally don't do. He tries to get the audience to cheer for actions that are both pointless and unethical. He does this by first attempting to manipulate the audience into seeing Beatrix Kiddo as meriting the audience's wholehearted sympathy. Then, by the end of the film, Tarantino tries to coax the audience into rooting for Beatrix on her quest to Kill Bill. The first step in attaining Tarantino's two goals is to reveal at

the end of *Volume 1* that Beatrix's daughter BB is alive and living with Bill as her parent. The second step is to showcase prolonged scenes of Beatrix's suffering at the hands of those she is trying to kill. This occupies most of the first half of *Volume 2*'s running time. The third step is to show Beatrix involved in a Kung-Fu training flashback in which she suffers emotional and physical abuse at the hands of her martial arts instructor (Pei Mei). The fourth step is to show Bill's reaction to his own murder at the end of *Volume 2* as something he feels is both necessary and noble of him and Beatrix to partake in. The final step is a pro-longed crying sequence in which Beatrix rejoices in the murder of her child's father and her new (de facto) parental custody.

Whether or not these steps work on the audience depends on how much Tarantino can play into its reactionary cultural assumptions. The first reactionary cultural assumption is the idea that revenge (via murder) is morally acceptable when the persons being slaughtered are themselves vicious killers. In the first hour of *Volume 2*, Beatrix attempts to kill Budd (Michael Madsen), another assassin responsible for the slaughter of her wedding party. Budd is retired from his job working as a killer for



Bill and now works as a bouncer in a strip club where his employers routinely humiliate him. Beatrix tries to sneak in Budd's trailer and Budd shoots her in the chest before she can step through the door. In a terrifying sequence showcasing Budd's unbridled sadism, he gleefully forces Beatrix to take part in her own live burial. While she is suffocating in the coffin, Tarantino's camera lingers on what looks like Beatrix's emotional meltdown. Beatrix behaves like any normal human being buried alive would. She shrieks, cries, and panics like a frightened child. Initially, it may seem as though the film is commenting on the futility of revenge and the emotional vulnerability of Beatrix. But the film then flashes back to a training sequence in which harsh Kung Fu Master Pei Mei (Gordon Lui) teaches Beatrix techniques that will allow her to break through the coffin with her hand and escape.

This sequence is played as comedy, even though what is transpiring is mostly

physical cruelty and psychological abuse. Pei Mei painfully bends back Beatrix's arms, forces her to bang in the skin of her knuckles, and makes her eat like a dog while he taunts and berates her. This sequence then cuts back to Beatrix in her coffin. She uses the knuckle bashing techniques she learned from Pei Mei in order to slowly and painfully punch a hole through the coffin Budd has buried her in. The soundtrack engages in movie triumphalism as the film tries to get the audience to root for Beatrix. The escape from her coffin and the resuming of her quest for revenge is portrayed in unambiguously positive terms. Again, the film shows no interest in the ethics or psychological futility of revenge. Rather, the film wants us to root for Beatrix so as to get greater satisfaction in watching her murder the vicious assassins who killed her friends and family. As noted above, the film is presupposing that revenge (via murder) is morally acceptable when the revenge is aimed at

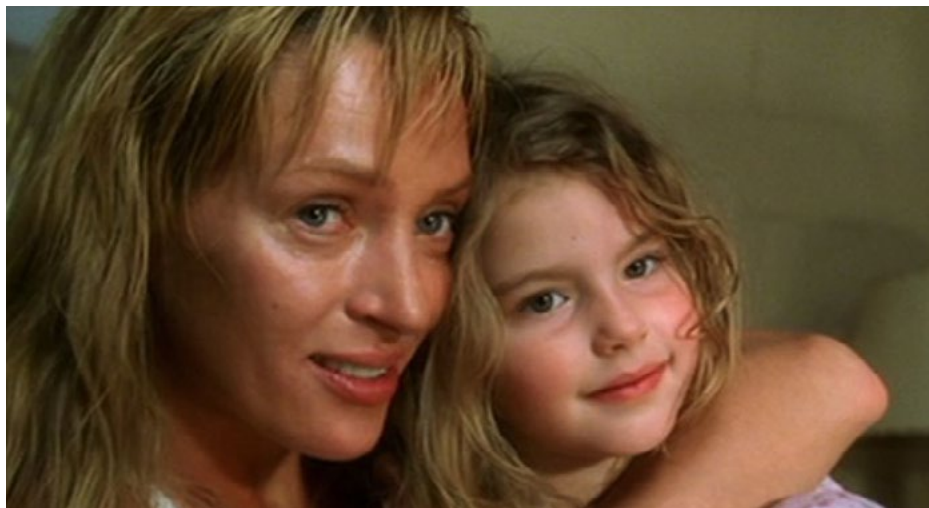
vicious killers. The film is also distancing the audience from the cruelty that Beatrix suffers at the hands of Pei Mei. The importance of playing the training sequence as slapstick comedy is it allows the audience to interpret Pei Mei's lessons as a positive thing. The training may have involved cruelty and abuse, but it enabled Beatrix to both save her life and continue her murderous rampage. And it's funny. Tarantino is here attempting to create a reaction in the audience that reflects the audience belief that cruelty and abuse are morally justifiable as long as they produce practical benefits for the recipient. This is the second reactionary cultural assumption that Tarantino relies on.

At this point, one might suggest that the film is so self-consciously dislocated from reality that its presuppositions are more meta-moral than they appear to be. Perhaps the film is not saying that murderous revenge is justified in our world when it is in response to the slaughter of a loved one. And perhaps the film is only expressing a positive attitude towards cruelty and abuse when it happens to assassins like Beatrix who gain benefits from Pei Mei's training. Perhaps the film is also suggesting that the reactionary cultural assumptions it is playing to are true only in the larger than life realm of samurai cinema that the film is depicting. The problem with this reading is that the larger than life world that is depicted in the *Kill Bill* universe contains no

features that make the morality of the behaviors depicted in *Volume 1* and *2* different from the morality of our world. *Volume 1* and *Volume 2* depict a world of criminals and assassins. In such a world, Beatrix and Pei Mei's behavior is in line with the moral code that this group endorses. But this is no different than our own world in which humans throughout the ages have been warriors and assassins who endorse these kinds of moral codes. If such moral codes are dubious in our world, there is nothing in the *Kill Bill* movies to suggest they are not dubious in Tarantino's fictional world. The hyper-stylized character of the *Kill Bill* world does not suggest in any way that in this world, cruelty, abuse, and revenge are morally acceptable. It only shows that in the *Kill Bill* universe, people believe that those things are morally acceptable.

The most disturbing reactionary cultural assumption that *Volume 2* relies on is the myth of the maximally transforma-





tive power of maternal instincts. According to this myth, maternal instincts have a transformative power that unconditionally justifies a woman choosing to conceive or raise a child. An implication of this assumption is that it doesn't matter whether or not the woman possesses the financial and material conditions necessary to safely raise such a child. It doesn't matter whether or not the woman dislikes children or the daily tasks of being a parent. It doesn't matter whether or not the woman is a sociopath who thoroughly enjoys violently killing others for a living. It doesn't even matter if the woman murders the father of the child. As long as a woman feels sufficiently broody, she will be a good enough parent for an audience to root for her in her battle to either conceive or attain custody of her child.

Of course, *Kill Bill Volume 2* doesn't assume that this reactionary cultural assumption has an uncomplicated acceptance in the audience of the film. It understands that this assumption competes with other audience assumptions and beliefs that undermine it. This is why the film works especially hard to get the au-

dience to forget those other assumptions and beliefs. The film wants the audience to believe, for the duration of their experience with *Volume 2*, that Beatrix's eventual custody of BB is a triumph the audience should rejoice in. The film tries to achieve this suspension of disbelief through the performance of moral sleights of hand. Such sleights of hand include the portrayal of Bill's murder as something Bill himself does not morally object to. The film shows Bill behaving as though his own murder is something that makes him nobler and reinforces his love for Beatrix. After the murder of Bill by Beatrix, we see a protracted scene in which Beatrix is crying on the floor of a hotel bathroom. She looks up at the ceiling and says to (presumably) God, "thank you, thank you, thank you." None of this is played for laughs.

In the final act of *Volume 2*, Beatrix finds Bill after receiving help from an assistant (Michael Parks) who suggests to Beatrix that Bill doesn't mind facing his death if it means being re-united with Beatrix. Once Beatrix finds Bill, she catches Bill and their daughter play fighting with toy guns. Beatrix immediately begins to



play along so as to prevent her child from being forced to witness violence. Bill introduces Beatrix to BB and demonstrates to both Beatrix and the audience that despite his day job as a murderous assassin, Bill has a loving relationship with his daughter. Bill, while tucking BB into bed, relays to her (in a surprisingly gentle way) that he "shot mommy" and is very sorry. Bill then allows Beatrix to spend time with her daughter watching the classic samurai revenge thriller *Lady Snowblood* (1973). At this point, the audience is confronted with the possibility that the scenario being played out before them might end in the formation of a new family. But this would require a capacity for forgiveness that Beatrix does not possess. For this family unit to be a success, the parents would need a competency with moral judgment and psychological stability that neither Beatrix nor Bill possess.

After BB goes to sleep, Beatrix walks into Bill's living room. She immediately attempts to kill him and Bill restrains her by pulling out a pistol. He then shoots her leg with a special truth serum that will allow him to interrogate Beatrix about her

decision to leave him without warning and marry someone else. She informs him about a pregnancy test that she took briefly before an encounter with an assassin called Lisa Wong. When finding out about the pregnancy, we see both Beatrix and Lisa deciding to call a truce once it becomes clear that Beatrix has the upper hand in a battle between the two. Lisa goes as far as to congratulate Beatrix. Although this flash back is played for comedy, the comedy is affectionate rather than sarcastic. If it were sarcastic, it would undermine the film's commitment to the maximally transformative power of maternal instincts. The film then cuts back to Beatrix and Bill sitting on Bill's garden table. They both discuss why Beatrix's pregnancy made her choose to leave Bill in order to create a better life for their daughter. Bill states that Beatrix should have told him about the pregnancy and she protests that if she had done that, Bill would have tried to claim BB as his own. Bill then relays to Beatrix his reasons for hiring assassins to help him slaughter everyone at her wedding party. For Bill, Beatrix's decision to mysteriously disap-



pear left him in a state of intense mourning because he believed Beatrix to have been killed. When he found out that Beatrix had met someone else, gotten pregnant, and planned a wedding under a false name, Bill went a bit crazy. As Bill puts it, he “overreacted.”

What motivates Bill’s overreaction is a belief that Beatrix is a cold blooded killer and such a killer can’t lead a successful life raising a child in a stable family. Because of the truth serum, Beatrix admits to Bill that she agrees with him about her essential nature being that of a cold blooded killer. She also agrees with him that her impending marriage was destined to fail. But she states that despite these failings, things would still be better for BB as she would not be born into the world of Bill’s assassins. Beatrix reiterates that her pregnancy ultimately made her care more about BB than Bill and Bill says that her actions broke his heart. Bill, like Beatrix, admits to being a cold-blooded killer and says his actions are the result of what hap-

pens when you break the heart of a cold-hearted killer. Beatrix then insists coldly that the two of them have unfinished business and she still intends to kill him. Bill throws the first blow and the two engage in a quick fight at Bill’s garden table. The fight quickly ends with Beatrix using another one of Pei Mei’s Kung Fu moves to explode Bill’s heart through his chest.

What is fascinating about this scene is that everything that happens in it is consistent with the truth of who the characters are. Although Bill has a loving relationship with his daughter, he can’t hope to be a good parent given that he is a cold-blooded killer who heads something like a samurai mafia. Beatrix, because she is a cold-blooded killer, can’t realistically work peacefully in a record store and be a consistently loving wife and mother. Because of Beatrix’s distorted moral judgment, she feels that she must kill Bill, despite the fact that he has a loving relationship with her daughter. Not only can she not forgive, she is willing to deprive her

daughter of her father because she can’t transcend the codes she chooses to live by. Bill believes his death to be in some way ennobling, like he is atoning for his sins. After Beatrix defeats him, he tells her that she is his favorite person and then asks her how he looks as he prepares to walk to his death.

The pathology of these characters in the final act of *Volume 2* is both disturbing and tragic. What we are seeing is a confrontation between two damaged individuals who are so trapped into the perverse social conventions they have identified themselves with, that they are unable to follow the few impulses they have which make them yearn to love and nurture. Such impulses can only be expressed in acts of violence and murder. The film ends with a child’s psychopath father being murdered by her psychopath mother who will then be her custodial guardian. But the film plays this ending in a manner that is so self-consciously sentimental that the audience is nearly bludgeoned into interpreting these events as a happy ending for Beatrix and her daughter. The following sequence in which we stare at Beatrix crying on the bathroom floor is designed to inspire the audience’s trust in her maternal instincts to be the parent that Bill could not be.

In the final two sequences, we see Beatrix hugging her daughter on a bed as the film cuts to an intertitle that reads: “All is right with the world as the lioness is with her cub.” The film then ends with a black and white image of Beatrix and BB smiling together in Beatrix’s car. BB is apparently not disturbed in the slightest about the fact that

her mother just murdered her father.

We may initially be tempted to interpret this ending as an ironic fantasy sequence. According to this thinking, the ending sequence is something like a dream sequence in which Beatrix’s fantasies come true. On this reading, the comedic or ridiculously sentimental aspects of the ending are just Tarantino commenting on the absurdity of Beatrix’s fantasies. The problem with this interpretation is that it is completely inconsistent with the tone and aims of *Volume 2*. *Volume 2*, as we noted earlier, is designed to get its audience to be emotionally invested in Beatrix’s quest to Kill Bill and regain custody of her child. But this emotional investment has to co-exist alongside the film’s propensity to elicit simple psychological reactions from the audience that are the staple of exploitation cinema. The only way the film can get the audience emotionally invested in Beatrix’s quest while simultaneously being a carefree romp is to get the audience to root for Beatrix. We are, in effect, being encouraged to both excuse and root for abusive parenting. If *Volume 2* were to tacitly acknowledge this fact, it wouldn’t achieve its entertainment aims. Hence,

**“ we are, in effect, being encouraged to both excuse and root for abusive parenting ”**

we can see that *Volume 2* is not just a film with an amoral attitude; it’s a film with an immoral attitude.

This immorality is not plausibly attributed to some psychopathic bent on the part of Quentin Tarantino. He seems to show (in his films and in interviews) no desire to corrupt youth. He doesn’t seem to be promoting some samurai code of ethics as a viable alternative to the morality of mainstream society. He is a tremen-

dously talented filmmaker who is (a) trying to entertain his audience and (b) doing so in a manner where he is taking his aesthetic cues from exploitation cinema. As we noted earlier, the *Kill Bill* movies are themselves continuously quoting such films. Tarantino is, if anything, just a film geek; a film geek like me and many people reading this film article. However, what separates us from Tarantino is not our filmmaking talent or insight into the nature of filmmaking. It is the fact that we can see the moral and aesthetic vacuousness of cinematic art that doesn't illuminate the world. When cinema merely serves up the world as a spectacle for the audience to enjoy, the film is cutting the audience off from what the film should be plugging the audience into. When a film does that, it ceases to be distinct in any qualitative sense from the hypothetical nun-torture films discussed at the beginning of this article. Films can't be progressive or edgy if they are not truthful. Exploitation cinema, as noted earlier, is a cinema of very deliberate lies. Because of Tarantino's appropriation of exploitation cinema goals, the *Kill Bill* films say nothing more truthful about the human condition than *Pretty Woman* (1990) or *Dirty Dancing* (1987).

Exploitation cinema, if anything, is just a highly visceral example of old-fashioned entertainment. Old-fashioned entertainment, even violent old-fashioned entertainment, is about as transgressive as Mumford and Sons albums or episodes of *Loose Women*. Such entertainment may shock and disturb, but only because it is shocking and disturbing. When a talented art house filmmaker like Tarantino takes on the aims of exploitation cinema, his work degenerates from an edgy reinvigoration of old movie genres into an embarrassingly well-executed form of earnestly re-

actionary shit. But as with any pile of shit, we can learn valuable lessons by asking ourselves why it came out the way it did.

# Once Upon a Time in Brazil:

Glauber Rocha's *Antônio das Mortes* (1969)<sup>i</sup>

Ben Noys



It might be that a Quentin Tarantino remake, or remix, is the ultimate imprimatur of trash, cult and / or exploitation authority. *Django Unchained* (2012) confers this authority on the spaghetti Western, or Western all'italiana. The earlier canonization of Sergio Leone, and the wider work of recovery on the genre by Alex Cox, suggests that the trash / cult status of the spaghetti Western has always been somewhat equivocal and fluid. What is striking about Tarantino's own effort of recovery is its engagement with politics – in particular, the politics of 'race' and slavery. The issue of 'race' has been contentious in Tarantino's previous work, and it seems that his spaghetti Western is not simply postmod-

ern pastiche but a site of (however problematic) political reflection.

Tarantino's political turn is no coincidence. Usually in the case of trash, cult, or exploitation cinema it's assumed that politics has to be found in or brought to disreputable or scandalous films from the outside – both in terms of form and content. Politics is added in, including the politics of justifying trash cinema as transgressive or disruptive of what we might call 'normal cinema' (after Thomas Kuhn's 'normal science'). The presumption underlying this manoeuvre is that these kinds of film have no significant politics of their own, or that the critic must speak their politics for them. The spaghetti Western,

however, was politically explicit from the start. This was cinema usually made by left-wing directors and writers, with strong anti-colonial and third-world orientations.<sup>ii</sup> The material of the American Western already reflected on issues of primitive accumulation – the process by which capitalism implants itself by violently separating workers from the land is, according to Marx, ‘written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.’<sup>iii</sup> While the US Western tended to treat this as a violent but necessary ‘civilizing process’, the spaghetti Western, already influenced by various revisionist US Westerns, films the ‘blood and fire’, critically probing the extermination of the Native Americans, the racial politics of slavery and the civil war, and US intervention in Mexico.

Here I want to consider another much earlier re-use of the spaghetti Western, in fact parallel to the spaghetti Western. It is much more politically explicit than Tarantino’s ‘postmodern’ effort, and it also unsettles the categories of cult, trash, or exploitation. This is the Brazilian filmmaker Glauber Rocha’s 1969 film *O Dragão da Maldade contra o Santo Guerreiro*, better known as *Antônio das Mortes* (the Brazilian title can be translated as ‘The Dragon of Evil against the Warrior Saint’). This was Rocha’s first international co-production, his first film in colour, and his first using direct sound. Rocha would often refer to the film as ‘my Western’.

Rocha was a revolutionary filmmaker, explicitly concerned with not only formal or aesthetic concerns, but the need to reorganize cinematic distribution and production to counter the influence of ‘North American Cinema’. He developed his cinema under the banner of what he would retrospectively call an ‘aesthetics

of dream’, that tried to rupture with the rationalising demands of colonial First World cinema and art. His work deliberately courted so-called ‘irrationalism’ to contest the imposed rationality of Western imperial culture, and particularly imperial cinema. His choice to rework the Western, which had been the foundational US national epic, is not surprising. Nor is it surprising that he should mimic the spaghetti Western, as an existing site of political reflection on the US genre.

The film itself is a rough sequel to the previous *Black God, White Devil* (*Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol*) (1964), involving the same character Antonio das Mortes, played by Mauricio do Valle. Antonio is a killer of Cangaceiros, the social bandits who operate in Brazil’s North-eastern sertão – a semi-arid ‘backlands’ region. This region plays a significant role in Brazilian national mythology. It is the setting of the ‘epic’ work that initiates Brazilian national literature: Euclid Da Cunha’s *Revolt in the Backlands* (*Os Sertões*) (1902). Da Cunha’s book is an eye-witness account of several military expeditions which eventually succeeded in the extermination of the mystical sect led by Antonio Conselheiro (Antonio ‘the Counselor’). The implication is that this extermination overcomes ‘backwardness’ and

finds a newly rational and ‘progressive’ Brazil, free of superstition and atavistic remnants. For Rocha, of course, the aim is to rework and challenge this narrative in the name of these ‘remnants’.

In *Antônio das Mortes* Antonio is called from retirement to eliminate the last of the Cangaceiro, in a classic Western narrative of the closure of the frontier and the establishment of so-called ‘civilization’ and ‘law’ by violence. Hired by Dr Mattos, on behalf of the local landowner, the

**“ an ‘aesthetics of dream’, that tried to rupture with the rationalising demands of colonial First World cinema and art ”**



blind ‘Colonel’ or ‘baron’, to kill the last Cangaceiro, the role of Antonio is to bring ‘order’ to the region and to make it safe for American dollars. Of course Glauber Rocha subverts this narrative from within.

The film is set in 1940 and uses direct cinematic parallels to subvert official narratives of Brazilian nationhood that are founded on this hidden and obscene violence. After we witness Antonio killing a Cangaceiro in the opening sequence we switch to a school teacher telling children the history of Brazil, from its ‘discovery’ in 1500 to the establishment of the republic in 1889. We then cut to an official celebration, with an urban procession of girls in marching bands. Antonio appears as a disoriented figure in the crowd. This procession will later be paralleled and contrasted by a flowing ‘march’ of the oppressed, which Rocha shoots in close-up as if we are marching, moving the camera around in deliberately non-linear fashion. Whereas the national celebration is shot from a distance with us as observers of the ‘linear’ march of progress, or progress celebrated, Rocha’s deliberately rough style places us with the oppressed.

His aesthetic throughout the film is deliberately disorienting. Rocha relied

on chance, especially when filming the poor people of the area. He used their spontaneous singing and, unlike in many Westerns, includes the mass of the poor as an actual collective character. This involves the dual disruption of political and cinematic ‘order’ – displacing the linear nature of marches and urban ‘organization’ with an ‘irrational’ eruption of the people into the space of cinema. Gilles Deleuze writes that Rocha offered ‘an act of story-telling which would not be a return to myth but a production of collective utterances capable of raising misery to a strange positivity, the invention of a people.’<sup>iv</sup> Rocha doesn’t simply uncover a pristine myth hidden beneath colonial reality, but reconstructs the people, cinematically and politically.

This reconstruction constantly puts pressure on order, drifting away from linear narrative and our expectation of advance and resolution. While we associate the spaghetti Western with extreme and violent action, something reinforced by Tarantino, we should note that these films often involve longeurs and delays. Rocha stays true to this, with long set pieces and delays between the moments of violence. These moments of violence at once obey



and subvert the usual forms of the Western. In his first duel between Antonio and Coirana, the last of the Cangaceiros, they fight with knives (instead of the usual gunfight) while holding a sheet or cloth in their mouths. They are literally bound together, and while Antonio wins the duel, his struggle with the idealist Coirana begins the reversal of his position from 'dragon' to 'warrior saint'. The Colonel is then forced to feed the people to placate them after this killing and Antonio takes up their struggle, demanding they be allowed to settle. Antonio says 'God made the earth and the Devil barbed wire' (in fact, one history of barbed wire is called 'the Devil's Rope'). After the duel we find that Coirana is not killed immediately, but spends much of the film dying, taken by the people to the mountains.

Antonio's transition to defender of the people angers the local landowners, who are already in dispute amongst themselves. Dr Mattos is having an affair with

the Colonel's wife, and so the Colonel hires another killer, Mata-Vaca, to kill Dr Mattos and Antonio. Mata-Vaca massacres the followers of Coirana before turning to kill Antonio. He and Antonio fight a duel with machetes, again departing from the usual spaghetti Western script, before we finally have the expected gunfight. Antonio and his sole remaining ally, the drunken teacher, engage in a classic gun battle with Mata-Vaca's men in the town. They defeat them, but the Colonel is killed by one of

**“ The resulting politics is not simply a personal tale of rightful vengeance... but the emergence of the collective within the personal ”**

the black followers of Coirana, called Antao, with a lance – the image of the dragon killed by Saint George. This killing demonstrates the superfluity of Antonio, with a representative of the people finally ridding them of their oppressor. Contrary to the usual image of an internal struggle between 'experts' – men of property able to hire killers, and the killers themselves – once again the people enter the stage of the Western. The usual stock characters of the Western – the gunfighter, landown-

er, doctor, teacher, etc. – are present, if estranged by this context, but also displaced by the people. The resulting politics is not simply a personal tale of rightful vengeance, or recognition by Antonio of which side he should be on, but the emergence of the collective within the personal.

This displacement is demonstrated by the final scene of the film, in which Antonio stands alone by a highway, presumably waiting to leave. Here we have the final image of modernity, as trucks and cars race by. The result is a temporal short-circuit, between the 'mythic' time of the people and the linear time of modernity. Rocha portrays the sense of alienation and the strange space of exception in which the film has taken place at little distance from the traffic of modernity.

More speculatively, this final image might also suggest the displacement of the filmmaker from the 'strange new positivity' of the people he has placed on screen. The people appear, but then Antonio leaves, so closing the film. Here the displacement lies between the modernity of the cinematic apparatus and the reconstruction of myth that Rocha undertakes. Rocha puts normal cinema under pressure, and also the revisionist or cult cin-

ema of the spaghetti Western, to include a political actor that it usually side lines or leaves passive. Yet Rocha, in the figure of Antonio, also inhabits a necessary distance from the people. This paradox is figured in the departure of Antonio, a confused figure who can neither accept modernity nor merge with the people. Rocha is again reflecting, I think, on the reconstructive elements of his filmmaking, which do not merely reflect or enter into reality. The sense of distance is not simply regretted in favour of the dream of a naive fusion, but instead placed and interrogated as an element of what makes the film an intellectual and critical act.

I've already suggested that *Antônio das Morte* hardly fits the classic image of a cult, trash, or exploitation film. Its cult status comes from it being little known, a contribution to what we might call the 'International Western', or the 'International revisionist Western', and its discordant style and execution. In fact, Glauber Rocha's film is closer to Godard's avant-garde 'Western' *Le vent d'est* (1970), in which Rocha appears before a road sign pointing to the cinema of the future. Often, as I've implicitly suggested, the appeal of the category of 'cult, trash and/or exploita-



tion' is predicated on its dumbness, which then requires intellectual justification. This 'dumbness' can be positively coded as the native vigour of the 'real people' in an anti-intellectual populism that, as usual, is often articulated by intellectuals. Rocha's film, instead, tries to reach out and constitute what Deleuze called a 'strange positivity' in dialogue with the people. It also recognizes its necessary distance and the need to construct this category. Rocha's attack on 'conservative reason' destabilises the location of his film. His emphasis on 'liberating unrealities' emerges in the new aesthetic of filmmaking that does not condone or endorse the 'rationality' of accumulation. The ordering of bourgeois life is to be treated by a new disorder, with the mystical and irrational as the resources of the people. These enter cinema through Rocha's work, but have had relatively short half-life. They are lost moments, liberating unrealities that have themselves disappeared into unreality.

ing his translations of various manifestoes and statements by Glauber Rocha, which I have drawn on for this piece.

ii. See my discussion in Benjamin Noys, 'Spaghetti Communism?', *Mute: Culture and Politics After the Net* 3.2 (2011-12): 62-73: <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/spaghetti-communism>

iii. Karl Marx, *Capital* vol. 1 (1867), Chapter 26, Marxists Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch26.htm>

iv. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, London, 2005, p.214.

v. Alan Krell, *The Devil's Rope: A Cultural History of Barbed Wire*, London, 2002. Alan Krell, *The Devil's Rope: A Cultural History of Barbed Wire*, London, 2002

All images are stills from *Antônio das Mortes* (1969)

# One Black Cowboy and a Cracker

Seeing *The Legend of Nigger Charley*, *The Soul of Nigger Charley*, and *Boss Nigger* through blue eyes

Garrett Chaffin-Quiray



I'm a White man and I love the character Mr. Nigger Charley. Call it xenophilia or call it liberal guilt. I'm simply more interested in cultural markers that exist outside Whiteness than in endlessly recycling mainstream standards.

I'm also aware that when a White man uses "nigger" it borders on hate speech.

To proceed without acknowledging the offense I may give in this essay is foolish but it's also the central problem of American race relations.

My first inkling that such a problem even existed was during childhood when I noticed how my hometown was organized into two parallel, white and brown com-

munities along the US-Mexico border. There were few Black people and what I then knew about Black America was culled from movies, TV, and pop music.

In adulthood I moved to Los Angeles and learned that the racial make-up of America is wider than a few shades of tan in either direction. I attended college, began a career, and married a Filipina, with whom I have two mixed-race daughters.

Given these facts, race matters to me because I regularly address issues on behalf of my children that I never faced on my own. I've also spent years studying movies and popular culture because I'm fascinated with what is unfamiliar.

To get there from here, though, let's move through five vantage points.

## 1

*Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, an autobiography-as-novel written by Alex Haley, was published in 1976. It centers Kunta Kinte, an 18th-century African sold into slavery in the United States, and the lives of his many descendants, including Haley.

In January 1977 the novel was transformed into one of the most watched TV miniseries of all time, *Roots*. The show fomented curiosity about Middle Passage and Diaspora, and caused many hyphenated Americans to unravel the thorny knot of their family lineage as a story worth telling inside the American Experience.

This genealogical adventure captured the attention of elder members of my family, too. Once, while on a weekend visit, I got bored with family lore and turned to a nearby bookcase where I found a worn

copy of *Roots* and the text confounded me.

In the book are conversations among 18th, 19th, and 20th century people, many speaking in dialect and using "nigger", sometimes only to describe a particular man or woman. One remarkably painful passage concerns the character of Chicken George as he talks with his owner, Tom Lea. George says, "You wants de straight up-an'-down truth, Massa, I b'lieves mos' niggers figger dey's bein' smart to act maybe dumber'n dey really is, 'cause mos' niggers is scairt o' white folks."

As my elders spoke of various ancestors, I learned that there are times when a word with widely understood negative resonance can and should be used. Sometimes doing so is the only way to describe a peculiar truth, which was exactly the task Haley set for himself in trying to document the movement of Africans through the crucible of American slavery into citizenship.

To this day *Roots* remains a cultural landmark. It helped me realize that there may be slave owners in my family tree, or at least folks that lived among such people without thinking it was a very bad thing. That opening Haley's book also taught me how real people use nigger was important, too, because I don't recall having previously experienced the word outside of admonitions never to speak it.

## 2

Niggaz Wit Attitudes, or NWA, released their debut album *Straight Outta Comp-*

*ton* in 1988. The group consisted of Eric "Eazy E" Wright, "Dr. Dre" (Andre Young), "DJ Yella" (Antoine Carraby), "Arabian Prince" (Mik Lezan), "MC Ren" (Lorenzo Patterson), and "Ice Cube" (O'Shea Jackson). The album sold in the millions and the first three songs provide the ground floor of what would become gangsta rap. 'Straight Outta Compton,' 'Fuck tha Police,' and 'Gangsta Gangsta' describe criminal enterprise, misogynistic sex, drug running, confrontation with the police, and a constant screed of vulgar poetry that retains the power to shock and thrill decades later.

NWA's joyful use of "fuck," "bitch," and "shit" suggested a world apart from what I'd known in semi-rural San Diego County. The band's anger equally haled my group of friends in our angst over growing older. Our key ritual was listening to the album while driving with the windows down, shouting lyrics. We learned about prostitution, how to buy and sell narcotics, and delivering insults. Despite the fact that NWA seemed to be a group of young men our age, we also recognized the divide from what we knew and what was being described to us in this richly expressive album we never played in front of our parents.

*Straight Outta Compton* was a contra-band and employed the Parental Advisory label. Parents in my social network wanted to shield us from profanity but the underlying issue of race made for comparatively little outrage so long as we accepted the mainstream criticism that NWA glorified the crime and sexism endemic to urban decay. This meant, "where brown-skinned people live," and we understood the point clearly while hoping to be freed from the sermon so we could listen to 'Dope Man.'

Importantly, it wasn't instantly clear



what "NWA" meant. Despite key lyrics in the title track, I remember working hard to unpack the acronym. When the plain truth was revealed we'd speak the band's name in hushed tones but the drift away from "Niggers With Attitudes" couldn't be more telling.

I eventually learned that nigga is part of Black vernacular. It is as an eye dialect that loses -er for a terminal -a, and thereby jettisons White dominance and denigration. Speakers and writers of nigga manipulate the insult into a point of rhetorical power.

NWA managed to do this quite a lot in *Straight Outta Compton*. The album portrays stories from the lives of the band's six members but the strategy of modifying an insult term into a marketable identity worth promoting, indeed celebrating, was an important step towards seeing how language controls life.

As a White boy thrilling to the struggles of urban Black manhood, the proof of NWA's genius and will-to-stereotype stems from their second album, 1991's *Efil4zaggin* (anagram of Niggaz 4 Life).

**“Parents wanted to shield us from profanity but the underlying issue of race made for comparatively little outrage”**

helped me realize that there may be slave owners in my family tree, or at



The title track is affirmative, sexist, crude, phallogocentric, and humorous, as in this stanza, which I clearly recall singing loudly:

Nigga, nigga, nigga, nigga, nigga, nigga, please

I'm treated like a fuckin' disease

You say why do I call myself a nigga so quick?

'Cause I can reach in my draws and pull out a bigger dick

### 3

Black American filmmaker John Singleton's feature debut *Boyz n the Hood* was released on July 12, 1991. It glosses Singleton's autobiography through the story of Tre Styles (Desi Arnez Hines II as a boy, and Cuba Good, Jr. as a teen), a South Central Los Angeles boy sent by his mother to live with his father and mature into manhood. Mom is Reva (Angela Bassett) and Dad is Furious (Laurence Fishburne).

Tre becomes a teen and falls in step with ne'er do well, Doughboy (Ice Cube), Doughboy's half-brother and athlete extraordinaire Ricky (Morris Chestnut), and sundry other neighborhood types until he finds himself at a crossroads. Poised to attend college with his chaste girlfriend Brandi (Nia Long), he sees Ricky's chances of escaping the 'hood on a football scholarship jeopardized by Doughboy's gangbanging, all of which is supervised by Furious who asks that his son walk the straight and narrow.

In the end, Ricky dies, wrong place, wrong time. Doughboy retaliates and he, too, is killed in street violence. Tre sees

the light and survives the 'hood, moving away to attend Morehouse College and Brandi moves with him to attend Spelman.

*Boyz* was Oscar-nominated for Best Director and Original Screenplay, and it was a hugely profitable movie that helped usher in a '90s craze of urban-set, Black-centered movies. Importantly, *Boyz* successfully capitalized on a problem acutely felt in parts of Black America: the difficulty of achieving success in environments limited by crime and poverty. As Doughboy memorably explains the matter for outsiders: "Don't know. Don't show. Or don't care about what's going on in the 'Hood."

Singleton graduated the USC film school in 1990 and spent the subsequent year making *Boyz* as I was preparing to enroll in the USC film school in 1991. Seeing his debut was a godsend that made many would-be filmmakers believe that their dreams of Tinsel Town success really might come true. To inspire our efforts we pinned newspaper articles to our doors and celebrated *Boyz* as it was called one of the best films of the year.

The thing is, *Boyz* didn't focus on the relationship between White people and Black people. It's entirely situated inside the universe NWA detailed in their records, a world apart from mainstream America. The movie's locales feature R&B and rap music, brown faces, and Afrocentrism, and the fact of peeking in on a



Boyz n the Hood

specific subculture that nonetheless communicated to all was entirely worthwhile and authentic.

### 4

Randall L. Kennedy, law professor and author, published *nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* in 2002. Towards the end of the book Kennedy writes:

**“every controversial word, but notably this most controversial of controversial words, has its place and purpose”**

The black comedians and rappers who use and enjoy nigger care principally, perhaps exclusively, about what they themselves think, desire, and enjoy—which is part of their allure. Many people (including me) are drawn to these performers despite their many faults because, among other things, they exhibit a bracing independence. They eschew boring conventions, including the one that maintains, despite massive evidence to the contrary, that nigger can mean only one thing.

Kennedy believes that every controversial word, but notably this most controversial of controversial words, has its place and purpose. His book explores this theme while satisfying a basic curiosity about where the word originates (Latin for black = niger, page 4). His book also gives someone like me, a blue-eyed White man, someone like him, a thoughtful Black public intellectual.

To visit Barnes and Noble and ask for *nigger* is really quite something. To then be guided through the store and sold a copy by a cheerful clerk, and to then read the book in public, is even more discomfiting. The closest I've ever come to feeling its equal was when reading Larry Kramer's

*Faggots*, but I digress.

Kennedy's book is packed with stunning details, as in his two-page set of excerpted on-line nigger jokes (pages 6-7). Still, the book's importance boils down to three points: 1- the usage of nigger is useful; 2- social stigmatization does the job of restricting nigger's use; 3- appropriation of nigger through the likes of NWA is real social power for those quick-witted enough to give old words to new meanings.

### 5

In 2007, filmmaker Quentin Tarantino gave an interview to The Telegraph in which he talked about future projects. He said:

I want to do movies that deal with America's horrible past with slavery and stuff but do them like spaghetti westerns, not like big issue movies. I want to do them like they're genre films, but they deal with everything that America has never dealt with because it's ashamed of it, and other countries don't really deal with because they don't feel they have the right to. But I can deal with it all right, and I'm the guy to do it. So maybe that's the next mountain waiting for me.

The resulting film, *Django Unchained* (2012), is a collection of movie references, including Sergio Corbucci's spaghetti western *Django* (1966), Richard Fleischer's *Mandingo* (1975), virtually every Blaxploitation movie Tarantino has ever seen, and the deep codes of the Western



Still from *Django Unchained*

tradition in movies.

Set in 1858 in the Deep South, *Django Unchained* is about freed slave Django (Jamie Foxx) who works with bounty hunter Dr. King Schultz (Christoph Waltz) to rescue his wife, Broomhilda (Kerry Washington). Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio) owns Broomhilda and Candie's household is firmly controlled by head slave Stephen (Samuel L. Jackson). The movie includes KKK-like terrorism, much mayhem and murder, threatened rape and castration, forced prize fighting-to-the-death among slaves, lengthy conversation about eugenics, opera, and bounty hunting, and lots of weirdly anachronistic music that feels very much at home in this hodge-podge that presses together historical signs to produce a distinctly 21st century entertainment.

*Django Unchained* is violent and funny. Most of all it's incredibly blunt about race relations in the fictionalized antebellum world. In particular, the movie sustains nearly two hundred utterances of nigger in 165 minutes running time.

For White viewers the film provokes questions. Is *Django Unchained* any good? Why does Tarantino use nigger

so much? Can I now say nigger when quoting the movie? Whose fantasy is the movie revealing?

### Mr. Boss Nigger Charley

Blaxploitation is best understood as a culturally specific movie cycle marketed to maximize profits through minimal risk. Black people take center stage, though not typically in principal roles behind the camera. Black America is the milieu of familiar stories, albeit in stereotypic settings like criminal underworlds and music clubs. Blaxploitation also recognizes race as an influence on daily life and is often quite direct in the presentation of sex, ribald humor, and the post-Civil Rights condition of upwardly mobile Black people, whether in legal or illegal pursuits, that are pinned beneath a glass ceiling of anti-Black public policy, law, and established habit.

The cycle overlaps with the Vietnam War, as in *Gordon's War* (Ossie Davis, 1973), the mainstreaming of cinematic pornography, as in *Tongue* (K.B., 1976), and the influx of Asian cinema, especially Hong Kongese entertainments like *Enter the Dragon* (Robert Clouse, 1973). After

the high point of the cycle was reached in 1973-1974, mass appeal movies like *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) and *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) demonstrated another way to stabilize the movie industry so the era came to close, although the films remain a rich cultural archive of regionally specific subcultures.

One recurrent trope in the cycle, rooted to Melvin Van Peebles's seminal *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), is the law-breaking Black man on the run from Whitey, eager for action, ready for sex, and able to defeat his foe, often over and through the bodies of subordinate Black women. Misogyny is not new to Blaxploitation; nor are violent stories and irregular quality, ranging from big studio polish to backroom smear.

My attraction to Blaxploitation isn't therefore an ironic nod to uneven execution but a twofold fascination. First, I am attracted to historical moments of immense change and Blaxploitation began when Black people entered the image-making culture, en masse, for the first time in history. Second, I am a self-hating White man and because the cycle showcases a non-White world I get to experience a society that isn't organized to benefit someone like me through a style of moviemaking intended for someone else's entertainment.

To feed my curiosity I regularly visited neighborhood video rental stores throughout the 1990s in search of Blaxploitation titles I'd never seen. I used a pecking order of quality with *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971) and *Super Fly* (Gordon Parks, Jr., 1972) at the top, and *Scream Blacula Scream* (Bob Kelljan, 1973) and *The Human Tornado* (Cliff Roquemore, 1976) at the bottom. Like many young men, I was drawn to the most lurid cover art, as in *Coffy* (Jack Hill, 1973), or else I gravitat-

ed to recognizable actors in movies with striking titles, as in Jim Brown's *Slaughter* (Jack Starrett, 1972).

As I read up on the period, several movies made it into the marginal notes but never onto rental store shelves. The lesson I drew was that even inside a purposefully narrow forum like Blaxploitation there is still a hierarchy of taste, prestige, production value, and narrative invention.

Enter *Hot Summer in the City* (Gail Palmer, 1976), *Welcome Home Brother Charles* (Jamaa Fanaka, 1972), and *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (Martin Goldman, 1972). Each of these titles is little seen. Yet all three have a special place in my memory as being too toxic to be seen because, until recently, they were virtually unavailable.

The first time I tried to find *The Legend of Nigger Charley* was 1995. When I moved to New York City in 1996 I looked again. When DVDs supplanted VHS tapes I looked again; I looked again when Amazon made a supermarket of the web, and again when Netflix went on-line. I've periodically looked for a copy ever since, sifting boxes at garage sales and hitting up friends for bootleg copies. Then, earlier this year, I found a version on Youtube. When I set aside time to watch, the title was pulled, and that's when I found a poor quality dub on Amazon. While removing the disk from the diamond case, however, it broke. By luck Amazon's streaming video service now stocks a copy so I finally made good on my endeavor after 18 years of steady failure.

*The Legend of Nigger Charley*, released March 17, 1972, is a western adapted by director Martin Goldman and his producer Larry Spangler from a story by genre writer James Warner Bellah. Ex-professional football player-turned actor Fred Williamson plays Charley, a slave freed by his dy-

ing master only to be re-enslaved by the plantation ramrod, Houston (John Ryan). When Charley kills Houston he runs away with two slave friends, Toby (D'Urville Martin) and Joshua (Don Pedro Colley), and the trio is trailed by a posse of White slave catchers, whom Charley's crew defeats in a frontier town with the help of a Black-Indian crossbreed named Shadow (Thomas Anderson) and a Black stable boy named Willie (Tom Pemberton). No longer pursued as fugitives but renowned as gunfighters, they help Dewey and Sarah Lyons (Douglas Rowe and Tricia O'Neil), a farmer and his wife, from a local gang led by the psychotic Reverend (Joe Santos). In the ultimate showdown, Charley's gang kills the Reverend and most of his gang, although Joshua, Shadow, and Willie are also killed. Charley and Toby leave the Lyons in peace and head into an unknown and dangerous future.

The movie's score is vintage early '70s funk. Stunt work is lovingly viewed in overlong shots that fail to cut on fast-moving action and there are very few close-ups. Instead the movie trades on spending most of its time in the company of Charlie and his friends, and in this way we are allowed to fully invest in a simple man, trained as a blacksmith, who wants space to control his life. Charlie wears homespun pants and a sleeveless buckskin shirt. Williamson's body is muscled and coordinated, and he speaks in a standard American dialect with very little slang, profanity, or hint of a challenging dialect.

Importantly, the movie opens in 1820 when African slave traders raid a village, murdering unsuspecting men and enslaving the surviving women and children for sale to White Europeans, among them the infant Charley and his mother. This introduction is significant because the era of slavery is not represented as bucolic. In-



Still from *The Legend of Nigger Charley*

stead, it's clear that brown-skinned people form livestock lorded over by grades of more empowered brown-skinned people until there is a controlling White man. Around the edges of this system is the fact of Black life lived in defensive posture, meaning romance and kinship occur outside Master's prying eyes, thusly deepening anger that's rarely allowed to bubble up to the surface in White-Black relations.

One key sequence that puts these influences together begins when Houston catches Charley making love to Leda (Marcia McBroom), a pretty house slave. It's somewhere in the 1840s or 1850s and Houston's underlings sexually menace Leda, beat up Charley, and put Charley in solitary confinement. The shift from romantic idyll to assault and near-rape is imperfectly framed but nonetheless ugly. It's not within the rights of chattel people to control their emotional and sexual lives, and it certainly isn't Charley and Leda's privilege to act the couple.

Despite landing a few punches while showing Williamson's physique in action, Charley is overcome, emasculated, and left confused about what to do next. He

knows he's been freed but it doesn't matter much because another White man, Houston, still controls him; that is, until Charley gets the upper hand when Houston drunkenly seeks him out to pick a fight.

The house slave Toby finds Charley standing over Houston's corpse and pushes Charley to ride away on a horse that field slave Joshua has taken from the plantation stables. Flight is a given for these three men and flight allows the movie to sustain a plot. Still, no time is spent wondering about the retaliatory violence that will surely be visited on Leda, or Charley's mother Theo (Gertrude Jeannette), or any of the remaining slaves that will bear the wrath of frightened White people since the key psychological horror of Antebellum America, a period where Black slaves outnumbered White people in parts of the American South, is the prospect of an armed Black uprising.

After a long journey away from the Virginia plantation, doggedly pursued by slave catchers in scenes reminiscent of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (George Roy Hill, 1968), Charley's crew enters a frontier town and stop at the saloon. Charley is tired and knows that the cat and mouse game he's playing as quarry will soon come to an end. Hoping to face death with dignity, Charley orders a beer and is called nigger. He retaliates by beating the White man who said it and tells Joshua and Toby, "I ain't taking no shit from no white man again. I'm a free man, and that's the way I'm gonna die." From that point Charley becomes superheroic, the archetypal Super Negro of Blaxploitation's height; he's a capable gunslinger, boxer, and knife fighter; a natural leader; a man with a conscience; and he eventually develops a keen eye for Mrs. Lyons who has been carefully rendered a

White-Indian crossbreed, and therefore an acceptable love interest should he become bored with killing White men.

As Roger Ebert wrote in his review of the movie in 1972, "This will do as easy entertainment, I guess, but the novelty of a black cowboy shooting a white bad guy is sure to wear off sooner or later, and then maybe black Westerns will be made with the same care as the traditional item." Ebert goes on to note the movie's race bating, whereby each White man that calls Charley nigger is inevitably killed, and he considers it tiresome. That may be true from the perspective of blunt characterization but it's a thrill to watch an ex-slave seek violent redress for years of mistreatment and cruelty, even if only through symbolic means in fictional entertainment.

One killing stands out. As Charley's group is attacked by slave catchers, Charley shotguns an assailant, literally shooting him out a window and into the street. It's not unlike the penultimate shoot-out of *Django Unchained* when Django shoots Lara Lee Candie-Fitzwilly (Laura Cayouette) and blows her out of the room. The cathartic value of this kind of explicit, over-the-top violence that flips the normal pattern of victim-killer cannot be overstated; it's the very premise of Blaxploitation's politics and charm, and the reason *The Legend of Nigger Charley* moves through its plodding turns as a western to sketch then-present values of Black self-determination. If only the Legendary Nigger Charley can get fair shake, Goldman's movie seems to say, he'll find his place in the world. If not, he'll kill as well as John Wayne does until he's home.

*The Legend of Nigger Charley* was a hit for Paramount Pictures in 1972 just as the studio won Best Picture for *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola) while preparing to release the comedy *Play It Again, Sam*



Still from *The Soul of Nigger Charley*

(Woody Allen), the literary adaptation *A Separate Peace* (Larry Peerce), the western *Bad Company* (Robert Benton), and the biopic *Lady Sings the Blues* (Sidney J. Furie), among others. *Legend* was inexpensively produced and earned strong box office, largely from urban markets teeming with Black audiences interested in seeing themselves on-screen, a key aspect of Blaxploitation.

*Legend's* sequel, *The Soul of Nigger Charley*, was released May 16, 1973. *Legend's* producer, Larry Spangler, served as director and reprised his producer role, and he co-wrote the script with Harold Stone.

*Soul* jumps in time to the post-Civil War moment and opens with a group of White men on horseback. Led by ex-Confederate Colonel Blanchard (Kevin Hagen), they attack a town of peaceful Black people and kill everyone they can find, save a re-enslaved, bow and arrow-wielding Black man called Ode (George), whom they stake to the ground to kill by exposure, and a Black boy named Marcellus (Kirk Calloway) that they failed to notice while killing Marcellus's parents.

A few hours later Charley and Toby ride

into town. They haven't aged much from *Legend*; Charley still wears homespun pants and a sleeveless buckskin shirt, and Toby still wears a black suit. They console Marcellus, strap an unconscious Ode to a horse, and ride for a friendly encampment of Quakers for help. Among the Quakers they find a mixed race assortment of peaceful folk devoted to working the earth in isolation. From them Charley and Toby learn that an ex-Confederate general is quietly building a new plantation system just across the border in Mexico, and that he's harvesting freed Black people to re-enslave in order to do it. Outraged, Charley leads a ragtag group of followers on an escalating set of adventures and gunfights to shut down the operation. Along the way he falls in love with mulatto Elena (Denise Nicholas), enters into a partnership with bandito Sandoval (Pedro Armendariz, Jr.), and eventually foils the plot, killing Confederate baddies, but also learning the price of leading men to their deaths, including Elena who dies saving his life.

The signature dilemma of *Soul* is how to move from the sheer violence of liberation that forms *Legend* and into a new society

that admits many races, ages, ethnicities, and professions. To that end *Soul* is a strange movie. It waffles back and forth from having Charley and Toby perform the Black clown of yore to acting like heroes that motivate the downtrodden they meet with words about how freedom is real only if everyone, everywhere, is free.

Interestingly, Blanchard is an all-services bad guy. On one hand he's a racist willing to kill for his employer. He's also willing to kill members of his own race, indeed his own militia, when reminded of how effective Charley has become at outmaneuvering him. Bigotry may be ugly but sadism coupled with savagery is even worse.

*Soul* references the post-Civil War period through the way Charley first meets Elena on the arm of an ex-Union soldier and Black man named Lee (Joe Henderson). The attraction between Charley and Elena is immediate, although she plays him off as just one more frontier bachelor until Lee is killed following one of Charley's plots to foil Blanchard. Charley feels guilt over Lee's death but Elena is impassive. She explains that as a mixed race slave her owner regularly used her sexually. With freedom she was forced to become a prostitute and that's when she met Lee, whom she never loved, although he accepted her as she is. Charley flinches over the details of her back-story but quickly overcomes his discomfort to admit affection.

A few minutes later the imminent confrontation that is *Soul's* whole story and pint is put on hold as Charley and Elena literally stalk each other across a mountain waterfall and into a lake. Williamson shows off his athlete's body and the actors cavort in shallow water, preparing to make love, all scored to the Don Costra Orchestra's song 'A Lonely Summer Love.' Span-

gler's theme seems to say that mutual love is the basis for satisfaction, or else how to explain these two good-looking people playing in a verdant pool and interrupting the gunfights and spilled blood the audience craves?

Re-enter Blanchard. Not only is he the chief nemesis, he's the key to maintaining the franchise of Nigger Charley movies that requires the lead bond with his best friend but never with a woman. After Charley's group wins the finale gunfight, Blanchard, thought dead, draws on Charley. Elena jumps in front of the bullet and dies, and Toby enfilades Blanchard, leaving Charley to helplessly cry out, "Why?"

*Soul* ends as Charley and Toby integrate into a mongrel community of Americans and Mexicans. Over Elena's grave Marcellus indicates his wish to start a new life and Charley acquiesces with laughter.

*The Soul of Nigger Charley* was profitable for Paramount Pictures in 1973 just as the studio was preparing to release the middle age crisis story *Save the Tiger* (John G. Avildsen), an animated adaptation, *Charlotte's Web* (Charles A. Nichols and Iwao Takamoto), Blaxploitation sequel *Super Fly T.N.T.* (Ron O'Neal), the literary adaptation *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* (Hall Bartlett), and biopic *Serpico* (Sidney Lumet), among others. *Soul* earned a fair return on investment, again by largely appealing to Black audiences now firmly attached to Fred Williamson's star power.

Paramount Pictures moved away from a third picture, however, which was when Williamson wrote a script and caught the attention of exploitation studio and distributor Dimension Pictures, the eventual studio of two other Blaxploitation movies of 1975, *Dolemite* (D'Urville Martin) and *Lady Cocoa* (Matt Cimber). Working with studio head Lawrence Woolner, and his husband and wife production team of

Charles S. Swartz and Stephanie Rothman, Williamson's project was attached to veteran director Jack Arnold and released February 26, 1975 with Williamson as sole writer, co-producer and star.

*Boss Nigger* opens at night. Two horse riders, their faces never seen and their bodies covered in black clothes, follow a group of four White thieves. At the moment of confrontation, the two horsemen kill their foe, to then be revealed as Boss (Williamson) and Amos (D'Urville Martin), a new iteration of Charley and Toby in this now only-loosely connected franchise. Gone is Charley's buckskin shirt and standard English; Charley wears a mustache, and he and Amos speak jive.

As in the prequels, Boss and Amos right the wrongs of evil White folk, although they bring along a new interest in capitalism because they now work as entrepreneurial bounty hunters very clearly focused on money. They save a lovely young Black woman named Clara Mae (Carmen Hayworth) from marauding White bandits and discover that there is a big bounty on a White outlaw named Jed Clayton (William Smith). The corrupt mayor of San Miguel, Griffin (R.G. Armstrong), offers the bounty, hoping the bounty col-

lector will become sheriff.

Boss and Amos drop Clara Mae at a Mexican encampment outside San Miguel and proceed into town, knowing no Black man will be given the sheriff's job or a chance at Clayton's bounty, unless they take both prizes by force. Lots of White folk call them nigger and the pair quickly corrects local discourtesies, kill a few baddies, and become the peacekeepers of San Miguel. In so doing they enforce several "Black Laws" that forbid calling Boss or Amos nigger.

Locals get riled up. Clayton loses more men. Griffin demonstrates he's a first class fraud and bigot, and local White schoolteacher Miss Pruitt (Barbara Leigh) takes a liking to Boss. Still, Clara Mae keeps her claim on Boss's heart so when Clayton kidnaps her, Boss attempts to make her rescue but is captured and tortured in Clayton's camp while Clara Mae is turned into a house girl.

Amos eventually frees them both and the three agree to separate before Clayton's final assault. Boss and Amos lay booby traps in town but Clayton accidentally finds Clara Mae and kills her on his way to San Miguel. In the ensuing gunfight Boss is shot multiple times, appar-

ently leaving him mortally wounded, but he still manages to kill Clayton and Griffin, and a host of other nameless White bad guys. The movie ends with Boss rolling out of town in a wagon driven by Amos, past the Mexican camp's church where Clara Mae is being given burial services, and into a bright sunny desert.

*Boss Nigger* was generally well received. Vincent Canby of The New York Times typifies the moment:

The wit of the film is in Mr. Williamson's performance, which is an immensely self-assured parody of the Man With No Name played by Clint Eastwood in Sergio Leone's films. Though the screenplay gives the supposedly comic lines to Mr. Martin, it's Mr. Williamson who is responsible for most of the good humor, ambling through the movie, doing the old Eastwood act of squinting, shooting and being irresistible to women with less effort than it takes most other men to select a tie.

Different from its prequels, *Boss* is ironic about Blaxploitation's riff on established genres and it's self-consciously funny with dialogue that regularly uses nigger. At first the blunt language is noxious, much like in *Django Unchained* some 27 years later, but then the insults fade into the backdrop, save for how Boss and Amos occasionally parley with White performers who are almost always two-dimensional bigots. The pattern reaches a high point when Boss and Amos sit for a restaurant meal and Boss tells their waiter, "I's a nigger and he's a nigger," and then orders something to eat. The scene foregrounds what many viewers no doubt realized, that *Boss Nigger* is, indeed, a Black man and more capable than anyone else of solving

the dilemmas his world presents him.

Importantly, *Boss Nigger* is a-historic to the franchise or the 19th century. The lead characters refer to slavery and their choice to become bounty hunters, but the fact of real American history isn't crucial; it's an excuse to persecute ongoing racism among White Americans against non-White Americans circa the mid-1970s.

*Boss Nigger* has a better home video presentation than the prequels, courtesy of VCI Entertainment and Jack Arnold's production crew, but especially composer Leon Moore and Terrible Tom who recorded the movie's theme song, 'Boss Nigger.' This third and final part of the Nigger trilogy is distinctly entertaining because it embraces Blaxploitation prerequisites like a sexually curious White woman that finds the lead attractive and because it moves quickly towards a bloody climax that makes a proper fetish of murdering heinous, racist jerks.

From where I sit as a White man, I'm made newly aware that Blaxploitation was chewing on extraordinarily dense cultural material that is often overlooked because the cycle has so many deplorable low points mucking up consideration of the highlights. My main point in this essay is that when the Nigger trilogy finally became available on DVD this curious father of mixed race babies found the nerve enough to explore one of the most overdetermined and powerful words in the English language as the necessary detail for describing a movie trilogy.

In *Boss Nigger* Amos confronts a plot complication and says, "Oh lord, another nigger." To which I add, another nigger indeed, Mr. Boss Nigger Charley.



Still from *Boss Nigger*

# Who Framed Brer Rabbit?

## Racial Politics in Walt Disney's *Song of the South* and Ralph Bakshi's *Coonskin*

Bradley Tuck



Song of the South promotional image

*Dat de reason I don't like ter tell no tale ter grown folks, speshually ef dey er white folks. Dey 'll take it an' put it by de side er some yuther tale what dey got in der min' an' dey'll take on dat slonchidickler grin what allers say, 'Go way, nigger man! You dunner what a tale is!' An' I don't - - I'll say dat much fer ter keep some un else funi sayin' it.<sup>i</sup>*

Uncle Remus in Joel Chandler Harris' *New Stories of the Old Plantation*

Quentin Tarentino's *Django Unchained* takes us on a journey through the last few years of legalised slavery in America. On this journey we encounter Stephen (Samuel L. Jackson). Stephen is a slave, an "inferior", but one who has acquired some status and other relative "privileges". Given these relative "privileges" he binds himself with loving allegiance to his master, the slave owner. Behind his loving grin and mischievous chuckle lies his own complicity in slavery. In fact, not only is he aligned with the slave owner,

he seems to sadistically relish the power it gives him over other slaves. In contrast, Django is a trickster, who uses his brains and cunning to escape traps and enact vengeance. Django is like heroes from the 1970s Blaxploitation genre; Coffy, Priest or Sweetback, who killed racist cops, avenged the Mafia, took out



Still from *Django Unchained*

corrupt politicians or struggled in a criminal underworld only to rise triumphant.

If Django is a trickster in the spirit of Blaxploitation cinema, it is tempting to interpret Stephen as a perverse and dark hearted Uncle Remus; the famous storyteller from Joel Chandler Harris' books. Harris was a folklorist and journalist who documented African-American folk tales. These tales had been passed down through the oral tradition between African-Americans working on the plantations and if not explicitly, then implicitly, the stories appeared to reflect centuries of slavery. Maurice Rapf<sup>iii</sup> tells us that, "If you read the fables carefully, you will find they are stories of slave resistance. Brer Rabbit symbolised the smaller, less powerful black man." Brer Fox, Brer Bear, and Brer Coon were the oppressive whites, and the stories were all about how to outwit the masters."<sup>iii</sup> Ralph Bakshi also notes that these stories were "hysterical in as much as they were black slaves dictating stories about how to get around white masters."<sup>iv</sup> Bernard Wolf notes how within these stories lay a white man's nightmare, where "whites are Negroes, the weak torture and drown the strong, mere blackness becomes black magic –

and Negroes cavort with cosmic forces and the supernatural, zipping their skins off at will to prow around the countryside terrorizing whites, often in the guise of rabbits..."<sup>v</sup>

Harris appeared not to notice these aggressive tones. Or maybe he did and wished to banish them from his sight. With the aid of his own character, the lovable chuckling Negro servant, Uncle Remus, Harris dampened the blow. Uncle Remus was a kind-natured ex-slave and storyteller, who told these stories to the little white child, son of the plantation owner. With the aid of Remus, Harris appeared able to soften the tales' subversive connotations. As Frantz Fanon writes "In order to protect themselves against their own unconscious masochism, which impels them to rapturous admiration of the (black) rabbit's prowess, the whites have tried to drain these stories of their aggressive potential."<sup>vi</sup>

Uncle Remus is Harris' vehicle to provide, what he calls, a "curious sympathetic supplement to Mrs. Stowe's wonderful defence of slavery as it existed in the South."<sup>vii</sup> He takes the servile figure of Uncle Tom from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, re-

names him Uncle Remus and weds him to the cunning trickster from the plantation folk-tales. Through Harris a marriage is made. The malevolent trickster and subservient storyteller are united as one. Harris tells us that Remus “has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery, and [...] has all the prejudices of caste and pride of family that were natural results of the system.”<sup>viii</sup> Uncle Remus is the ab-

absolute opposite to the trickster rabbit; he is the obedient servant, who can alleviate white man’s “guilt” with his charming grin. Through Remus’ grin, the stories are recast and gift-wrapped.

Harris, then fitted the hate-imbued folk material into a framework, a white man’s framework, of “love”. He took over the animal characters



Still from *Song of the South*

and situations of the original stories and gave them a human setting: the loving and lovable Negro narrator, the adoring white auditor. Within this framework of love, the blow was heavily padded with caresses and the genuine folk was almost emasculated into cute folksy.

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Uncle Remus was the perfect framing device, deflecting atten-

tion from the white man’s guilt and the black man’s hate and, instead offering an image of interracial love. “Uncle Remus” is the device that makes the bunny palatable to the newly acquired white audience, who consume it cleansed of hate and injected with love. The character of Uncle Remus allows us to turn away from the historical context of racism and oppression and reinvent the stories where the days of slavery and caste can be romanticized, ignored or forgotten.

Remus and the rabbit, or, to put it more generally, the servant and the trickster appear as archetypes who loiter in the American cinematic unconscious ready to re-emerge at any moment. If the trickster manifests in everything from Bugs Bunny to Blaxploitation, the cheery self-contented slave

**“ Uncle Remus is the absolute opposite to the trickster rabbit; he is the obedient servant, who can alleviate white man’s ‘guilt’ ”**

is continually re-imagined in everything from Uncle Tom and the Black maid (The staple of many early Hollywood films) to Tarentino’s Stephen. It is with irony then that Harris’ Remus worries about his stories being appropriated and mixed with other tales. From Harris’ literary output to Disney’s musical *Song of the South* (1946) and from Bakshi’s Blaxploitation cartoon *Coonskin* (1975) to *The Adventures of Brer Rabbit* (2006) the tales of Uncle Remus (Sometimes cleansed of Uncle Remus) have been re-shaped and reinvented throughout cinema history. I will focus on how two of these films (*Song of the South* and *Coonskin*) have used cinematic devices to frame the little rabbit, sometimes to ensnare him and other times to set him free.

#### The Disneyfication of Uncle Remus

Disney wanted to remain true to Harris’ stories, whilst adding a little magic of their own. Uncle Remus undergoes a Disney makeover, including a beaming grin, uplifting songs and a battalion of cutesy animated animals follow him around in a manner similar to Snow White (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 1937). Through Disney, Uncle Remus was

transformed from a humble storyteller to a Hollywood hero and moral guide, in some respects more like Mary Poppins (*Mary Poppins*, 1964) than the servile Uncle Tom. Like Mary Poppins, Uncle Remus becomes the portal to magical enchantment and wonderment.

As with Mary Poppins, the foil of *Song of the South* is the middle-class (white) family who seem unable to perceive problems beyond the end of their nose,

or as Remus puts it, they were “mixed up in their own troubles.” You may have assumed that these troubles would have been political in nature. As Southern slave-owner they had just lost the civil war and had to adjust to the emancipation act which made it illegal to own slaves, but they seem to be doing fine.<sup>x</sup> Their problems weren’t so much economic or political, but personal. The troubles come to light as Johnny, his parents and their black maid, Aunt Tempy, travel to see Johnny’s Grandma at the plantation in the heart of the Southern countryside. Johnny knows that something is up. “Mamma,” he asks “why are we going to Grandma’s?” “Why I told you dear, for a visit!” replies Miss Sally, his mother. She isn’t telling him something. Johnny persists, “Why didn’t she come to ours like last spring?” An awkward expression appears on Miss Sally’s face and in an attempt to divert the conversation she replies, “I thought you would enjoy seeing the plantation”. Johnny is not convinced and continues to pry. “Is Grandma mad at us?” he asks.

**“ transformed from a humble storyteller to a Hollywood hero and moral guide ”**

Johnny suspects that Grandma might be angry at what his father, Mr John, writes in his newspaper. Everyone else is! But that isn’t it. His father reassures Johnny that Grandma “likes what she reads.”

Underneath the façade, however, two problems present themselves; One is personal (John and Sally’s marriage), the other points to the political (controversy with the newspaper). But we, like Johnny, are denied access to the finer details. Instead, Johnny (and the audience) is distracted from the awkward topic by talk of Uncle Remus. Johnny’s

eyes are aglow. "Is Uncle Remus real?" Johnny asks in amazement. "Real!" Aunt Tempy replies "Of course he is real. Wait until he tells you the tale of Brer Rabbit, then you'll know he's real."

The carriage rides into the plantation and travels up to the house where they are met by Johnny's Grandma. She asks Toby, a black child of similar age to Johnny, to take care of him and make sure he doesn't get into trouble. Johnny and Toby appear to make friends instantly. On the one hand, Toby is a servant to Johnny. He has certain duties to perform and is, in a respect, an inferior. But Johnny doesn't see that. They are almost instantaneously friends and equals. Despite being a plantation where slaves have only very recently gained emancipation, there appears, at least superficially, no racial tension at all. The real trouble centres on the marital unit.

The couple seems weighed down by city life and the political controversies at the newspaper. This Southern plantation seems unscathed after defeat during the civil war and the emancipation act, and appears instead as the epitome of social harmony. The troubles, it would seem, are emanating from city life. It is to these troubles, that Mr. John, as soon as he arrives, must return, whilst simultaneously leaving his marriage in the balance.

Johnny is distraught at his father's leaving and knows something is wrong.



Stills from *Song of the South*

That night he decides to run away. He packs a hamper and leaves the plantation house. But it isn't long before he runs into Uncle Remus and the ever-cheerful black plantation workers. The plantation and the woods that surround it are filled with joyous singing. They are in direct contrast with the feel of the cold and stern plantation house. Whereas the wealthy white family seem cold, stern and self-absorbed, the ex-slave plantation workers appear not to have a trouble in the world.

Jim Korkis draws out the critique of this caricature by quoting Frederick Douglas:

I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the North, to find persons who speak of singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slave's sing most when they are most unhappy.<sup>xi</sup>

Disney's message is somewhat different. In *Song of the South*, Remus sings with full hearted glee.

Zip-a-dee-doo-dah zip-a-dee-ay  
My oh my what a wonderful day  
Plenty of sunshine heading my way  
Zip-a-dee-doo-dah zip-a-dee-ay

Disney, true to form, shares none of Douglas' sobering sentiments. This is not particular to *Song of the South*. Disney films are rife with the glamorisation of hard work with the addition of a whistle, from Snow Whites' domestic work ethic of "whistle while you work" to Mary Poppins' spoonful of sugar that keeps chimney sweeps counting their lucky stars, whilst leaping, dancing and singing from the roof tops. In Disney films the oppressed, poor and exploited aren't really oppressed, poor or exploited at all. Uncle Remus is a perfect example. Of all the characters in *Song of the South* it is the black plantation workers that seem the most happy.<sup>xii</sup> According to Douglas Brode, this demonstrates that the film, contrary to popular belief, is not racist.

Remus signifies the film's moral centre, positively influencing the Anglo child-hero, Johnny (Bobby Driscoll). Remus resembles Mary

Poppins [...] in coating the pill of moral education in an entertaining manner. He, according to the dictates of Romantic philosophy, has learned what is truly important by living close to the earth. Distraught Johnny, running away from home after his father leaves, is drawn to the warmth and beauty of the black community, enjoying gospel songs in the woods. Whenever Johnny peers back over his shoulder at the plantation house, it appears cold, aloof, and off-putting. Remus's cabin is where Johnny feels completely at home—loved, wanted, respected. "Mr. Bluebird's on my shoulder," Remus at one point sings, as an animated bluebird descends. He, like Davy Crockett, Snow White, and other Disney heroes, is Rousseau's natural man, that philosopher's best man. The essential irony of *Song* is, in the Romantic-philosophic vein, how oblivious adult whites (particularly Ruth Warrick as Miss Sally, the most civilized and corrupt among them) are to the true meaning of life, as compared to how open and aware the earthy and unpretentious blacks are.<sup>xiii</sup>

It is worth unpacking what this "romanticism" amounts to. Rousseau tells us "that most of our ills are our own making, and we might have simply avoided them all by adhering to the simple, uniform and solitary way of life prescribed by nature."<sup>xiv</sup> The savage is a "stranger to almost every disease, except those occasioned by wounds and old age." In contrast, Rousseau tells us that "the history of human disease might easily be composed by pursuing that of civil societies".<sup>xv</sup> If the state of nature, for Rousseau, remained preferable to our own civil socie-



ties, it was not because nature was free of pain, suffering, wounds and old age, but because knowledge and social kinship brought problems of its own. Rousseau, however, was also deeply egalitarian and deeply despised the master-slave relationship. Rousseau tells us to

...tolerate neither rich people nor beggars. These two conditions, naturally inseparable, are equally fatal to the general welfare; from the one class spring tyrants, from the other, the supporters of tyranny; it is always between these that the traffic in public liberty is carried on; the one buys and the other sells.<sup>xvi</sup>

In light of this, Rousseau concludes “as to wealth, no citizen should be rich enough to be able to buy another, and none poor enough to be forced to sell himself.”<sup>xvii</sup> For Rousseau it is the modern civil society itself that has brought with it rabid inequality. Disney romanticism, however, shares none of Rousseau’s egalitarian concerns. If figures such as Snow White and Uncle Remus find themselves at home in nature it is because they have learned to whistle while they work: to escape nature’s grievances with a smile. Disney romanticism, finds emancipation in the beggars and the poor, in plantation workers, chimney sweeps, and socially outcast dwarfs. In Disney films it is those who are excluded from society that are free from its diseases, delusions and social pressures. Plantation workers, dwarfs in the mines and chimney sweeps may sing and dance with delight and abandonment, but the middle-class families, bound by social expectations, shoulder the weight of civil society. From a Disney perspective, poverty, exploitation and slavery may turn out to be a bless-

ing in disguise for its so-call victims, who, it turns out, are freed from the weight of sociality.

For Brode, however, *Song of the South* is not about the master-slave relationship.

Following *Song’s* release, the NAACP issued a statement praising *Song* for its “remarkable artistic merit” but decrying “the impression it gives of an idyllic master-slave relationship which is a distortion of the facts.” This evaluation derives from the mistaken (if universal) notion that *Song* is set during the pre-Civil War era. In fact, the film takes place in 1867. The film’s blacks are freedmen who chose to work for wages on that plantation where they once served as slaves.<sup>xviii</sup>

It is hard to see this as much of a rebuttal. If 1867 is accurate then that is only 2 years after the end of the civil war and the emancipation act, which made it illegal to own slaves. These so-called “freemen” still live under the residue of centuries of slavery. Their culture, consciousness and material condition remains conditioned by the pre-existing fabric of slavery. In the film, despite the emancipation act, the black servants still hold an inferior position (they are there to serve the rich white family), they are poor and their children have no access to education. At one point Toby says to Remus, “Uncle Remus you tell the best tales in the whole united states of Georgia”. He seems ignorant of the social-political landscape of the time. This has been criticised for its apparent mockery of the black character,<sup>xix</sup> however, in contrast, it is one of the very few honest moments in the entire film. It is one of the very few moments where the



*Song of the South* promotional image

inequality of the plantation is made evident. Equal opportunities and access to education is what distinguishes Johnny and Toby, and even if the ex-slaves are free to leave, they are bound to the plantation, which serves to sustain their livelihood.

But Remus doesn’t just sing songs, he tells tales. In the company of Remus, Johnny is quickly introduced to Brer Rabbit. As Remus start telling a story we are transported from the live-action world to a cartoon wonderland. Here the Brer Rabbit fables are re-imagined in the spirit of the slapstick cartoons of the 1940s such as MGM’s *Tom and Jerry* or Warner Brother’s *Bugs Bunny*. The parallels between such cartoons and the African-American folk tales are evident. In both an animal from the lower end of the pecking order (Jerry the mouse or Bugs Bun-

ny) outwits a cat or hunter (Tom or Elma Fudd). These animations, like the folk tales, are essentially tales of power struggles, which become sadistic, as cats and hunters get their competence. However, if these cartoons introduced an element of the macabre, they simultaneously save us from it. No-one dies for too long and are soon resurrected with no apparent wounds or injuries. The slapstick nature of the violence prevents us having to confront real violence.

However, slapstick itself doesn’t necessarily depoliticise. Disney depoliticises these tales by framing them with the live-action that makes it clear that these stories are not about the master-slave relationship at all. As Maurice Rapf notes, in *Songs of the South* Brer Rabbit is not meant to be the slave outwitting his master, but the “alter ego of the little white

boy”.<sup>xx</sup> Throughout the film Remus’ stories teach him seeds of wisdom. In the first, Brer Rabbit decides to run away and leave his troubles behind. However, he runs straight into Brer Fox’s trap. As he has very little strength he can only escape by using his head. He does this by tricking Brer Bear to take his place. The message, for Johnny, is that he can’t run away from his troubles. Johnny decides not to run away.

Remus tells him another story for dealing with bullies. Johnny is being bullied by the Favere brothers, Jack and Joe. The Favere are a poor white family that work on the plantation. It becomes clear that Jack and Joe, and not the white slave masters, are the human equivalent of Brer Fox and Brer Bear. Johnny befriends the brothers’ younger sister, Ginny, who gives Johnny the runt from their new litter of puppies. As Johnny isn’t allowed a puppy of his own he secretly leaves it with Uncle Remus in his cabin, but the Favere brothers are furious. They want it back. Remus’ tale of the Tar Baby serves to teach Johnny methods to deal with such bullies. In this version of the tar baby, Brer Fox and Brer Bear create a trap for Brer Rabbit in the form of a doll made of tar. The trap is left out for Brer Rabbit, and Brer Fox and Brer Bear lie low. Brer Rabbit comes skipping down the road and when the Tar Baby fails to respond to his “how do you do?” Brer Rabbit picks a fight and soon finds himself covered in tar. Bernard Wolf provides an interesting racial reading of this story. Tar for him is blackness and “tar, blackness, by its very yielding, traps.”<sup>xxi</sup> But in the Disney film, tar is simply a metaphor

for messing around in other people’s business; something the Favere brothers themselves need to learn. Brer Rabbit now in the clutches of Brer Bear and Brer Fox manages to escape by his masterful use of reverse psychology: “Knock my head clean off, hang me, skin me” Brer Rabbit says “but whatever you do, please don’t throw me in that briar patch.”(My abbreviation) Brer

**“ It is hard not to notice the sadism that underpins the tale, but the children only see love ”**

Fox falls into his trap and flings the bunny into the thistles and thorns, and Brer Rabbit, born and bred in a briar patch, makes his escape. The story serves to teach Johnny a technique to conquer bullies. As Johnny and Toby are walking home they meet the Favere Brothers, who tell Johnny that they will tell his mother about the dog that he is secretly keeping in Remus’ cabin. He replies “go ahead, tell Aunt Tempy, tell Grandma, you can even tell my mum, but whatever you do don’t tell your mum.”

On another occasion, after being attacked by the Favere Brothers, Uncle Remus tells Johnny and Ginny a tale to cheer them up. In this story, Brer Rabbit avoids being eaten by telling Brer Fox and Brer Bear about his laughing place. Brer Bear is intrigued and refuses to let Brer Fox cook the rabbit until he has seen this laughing place. Brer Rabbit leads them to a bees hive and watches the two of them being stung. When Brer Bear says “You said this was a laughing place and I ain’t laughing,” Brer Rabbit replies, “I didn’t said it was your laughing place. I said it was my laughing place, Brer Bear.”

It is hard not to notice the sadism that underpins the tale, but the children only see love. “I wish I had a laughing place,”



Miss Sally in *Song of the South*

says Johnny. “Me too” says Ginny and so they set out on finding their own laughing place. If Harris transformed these stories from tales of hate to tales of love, Disney follows suit transforming the tales, adding cutesy moralism in excess.

The moral lesson of the film, however, is not aimed at Johnny, but his mother. Absorbed in her own marital worries and concerned for her son, she seems unable to genuinely see his own needs. She tells her son that he must prepare for a visit from his grandmother (his father’s mother). He responds: “But Toby and I were going frog hunting.” She reassures him, “That is alright Darling, you can go another day.” One the one hand she is dismissive, failing to attend to her son’s concern. On the other hand, she wraps her disregard in reassuring tones and loving motherly charms. She enacts the role of what she believes a “proper mother” should be, but in doing so she often fails to attend to what her son really wants

**“ Uncle Remus, as complaint and subservient as he tries to be, can’t stop telling stories ”**

for [Johnny] not to hear that story for a while.” With Remus no longer able to tell stories and having lost his dog, Johnny begins to feel the joy and support that was helping him through a family crisis slip away.

Johnny’s empathetic grandmother sees what Miss Sally misses. Without Remus and his stories, the child would

and needs.

She is unlike her mother, who, whilst a plantation owner, seems far more tolerant, empathetic and understanding of others. Grandma’s experiences as a slave-owner seem to have helped

her acquire tolerance, empathy and understanding. In contrast, Miss Sally, the city dweller, is cold, lacking in empathy and disapproving. She is immediately opposed to letting her son have a dog and when the Favere Brothers finally tell her that Uncle Remus is keeping it in his cabin, she tells the children that “Uncle Remus will get you your dog back to you.” If Remus was a freeman he would be within his rights to keep the dog, but Miss Sally doesn’t see him that way and

neither does Remus himself. He passively complies with Sally’s orders. She is also disapproving of Remus’ stories and says that “it would be better



Walt Disney

be absolutely desolate.” She says, “He needs something.” Heeding her mother’s advice, Miss Sally decides to arrange a party. The party, however, will be a segregated party with no black (Toby) or poor (Ginny) children present. When Johnny asks if he can invite Ginny, Miss Sally seems to launch into another of her reassuring dismissals: “Well there will be plenty of other girls and boys...” But her mother finishes her sentence “...that one more won’t make any difference.” Unlike her daughter, Grandma seems to understand that Johnny needs his friends, even if they are from a different economic and social class.

Uncle Remus, as complaint and subservient as he tries to be, can’t stop telling stories. When Miss Sally finds out she is very upset. Failing to see that the son’s erratic behaviour may be a consequence of the fragile family life, she blames Remus and tells him “From now on I want to you to stay away from Johnny, you understand? Completely away.” Good subservient Remus understands and he complies without answering back. But even

if slavish and complaint in response, Remus does what only a freeman can do: leave. When Johnny finds out, he chases after Remus. His mother’s attempt to protect him leads to the complete opposite and Johnny, distraught and upset, takes a short cut through a dangerous field only to be mauled by a bull.

That night the plantation is filled with sadness and mourning. The black servants sing and pray outside the plantation house. Mr. John has returned, but the child is not responding. Mr John and Miss Sally wait and worry. Johnny calls out for Uncle Remus in his sleep. His Grandmother calls Remus in and he begins telling stories. Hearing the story, Johnny wakes, to find his father there too: “Daddy!” The family appear united again and Miss Sally seems to have changed her heart. Drawing from Uncle Remus, she tells her son “we will have the laughinous place in the whole world.” Miss Sally learns to lighten up and give her son fun on his own terms. With the family unit restored, Remus leaves telling us that “things are looking mighty satisfactory.”

In the final scene, Johnny has recovered and is running and singing hand in hand with Toby and Ginny. “Zip-a-dee-doo-dah” they sing as Uncle Remus watches on. Suddenly Brer Rabbit appears and greets them. Before long, a whole host of cartoon animals and even Johnny’s dog is running with them as they dance up the hill.

Douglas Brode draws our attention to the multiculturalist connotations of the scene.

In *Song’s* final shot, total integration is achieved. A recovered Johnny (privileged white) takes the hands of Ginny (poor white) and Toby (poor



Stills from Coonskin

black) to dance together, drifting away from civilization (the plantation) into the natural world (beyond Remus’s cabin).<sup>xxii</sup>

Douglas Brode sees in *Song of the South* a multiculturalist dream grounded in a romantic admiration of nature. In this respect, the ending of *Song of the South* parallels Disney’s 1964 theme-park ride *It’s a Small World*, which presented nationalities from around the world living in harmony. The ride celebrated diversity by showing children of every nation, as puppets, singing the same song. Each child

was dressed in clothing that expressed their cultural and regional differences and sang their song in their own language. At the end of the ride the children of the world came together to sing the song in unison.

Walt Disney has often been described as both a racist and a multiculturalist.<sup>xxiii</sup> The two elements would appear to contradict. However, what if Disney’s racism were not a product of racial hatred or maliciousness, but inherent in the company’s multiculturalism itself? Disney films seem to be swamped in a multiculturalist denial. The multiculturalism of *It’s a Small World* is blind to economic inequality, social injustice and ideological differences. The theme park ride offers

a utopia, positing a world full of diversity and harmony, whilst ignoring tensions and struggles in the real world. Utopian dreams and ideals can be valuable and inspiring, but are easily corrupted when they are celebrated at the expense of facing social and economic injustice. When used at the expense of fighting injustice, such utopian ideas often place a halo over existing inequalities. This is why Brode’s defence of *Song of the South* is itself problematic.

Never during the film does Toby’s blackness become an issue, and at no

point is the issue of race raised among adults. Johnny's grandmother (Lucille Watson), living closer to nature than her Atlanta-bound daughter, treats Remus as an old friend rather than a former slave.

xxiv

It is hard not to think of Oscar Wilde's remark that "the worst slave-owners were those who were kind to their slaves, and so prevented the

horror of the system being realised by those who suffered from it, and understood by those who contemplated it."<sup>xxv</sup> Far from presenting multicultural equality, *Song of the South* uses multicultural motifs to glorify the inequalities of plantation life. The final sequence, where the children skip away from the plantation, does not signal an emancipated future, but, as Brode points out, the embrace of nature. Just as Grandma, the former slave-owner demonstrates that tolerance and racial unity emanate from the plantation and not the city, the children find magic, not in social justice, but the natural world. The horizon to which the children and animals skip towards is not, therefore, the horizon of a full and genuine racial emancipation, but mere diversity; a diversity that ignores questions of equality and well-being; a diversity grounded in denial.

### Brother Rabbit Strikes Back

I would like to think of Ralph Bakshi as



Stills from *Coonskin*

a counter-Disneyan. If the point of Disney is to deny racial and political wounds, the point of Bakshi is to lay them bare. Bakshi is not asking us to deny equality in the name of a good ol' multiculturalist sing along; instead Bakshi asks deep and soul-searching questions. In this respect, Ralph Bakshi's *Coonskin* should be read as a response to Disney's *Song of the South*. Like *Song of the South*, *Coonskin* tells the stories of Brother Rabbit through slapstick animation, framing it with live-action. *Coonskin* is a film that integrates Blaxploitation cinema, the Brer Rabbit tales and Bakshi's own animated politically satirical slapstick that he developed in *Fritz the Cat* (1972) and *Human Traffic* (1973). We could argue that *Coonskin* "politically corrects" *Song of the South* by removing Uncle Remus and by calling Brer Rabbit by his full name: Brother Rabbit. But *Coonskin* is far removed from politically safe retellings, which, like *The Adventures of Brer Rabbit*, removes Remus and his young auditor and focuses

instead on the fables. *Coonskin*, in contrast, attempts to draw out the subversive potential of the original stories, whilst simultaneously forcing us to address the racism that has circulated them. By focusing on the power dynamic implicit in the early tales *Coonskin* is not attempting to tone down the racial controversies of *Song of the South*, but amp them up. *Coonskin* doesn't attempt to cleanse Disney of its bigotry, but instead to address what Disney denial helps us ignore.

The film opens with footage of a real life street, possibly somewhere in Harlem. On this street stand two black American male cartoon characters dressed in contemporary (1970s) clothes. One of the characters tells us, "Now I am going to give you a little example. I heard that 150 of you white folks committed suicide by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge, and out of those 150 there was only two that were Niggers and one of them was pushed."

They laugh as they turn and walk

away. The scene is directly followed by a profile view of Scatman Crothers from the left side of the screen against a yellow background. Crothers is singing: "I'm the Minstrel Man/I'm the Cleaning Man/I'm the Po' man/I'm the shoe shine man/I'm the Nigger Man, Watch me dance." This blues song functions as a parody of the Remus character: the Negro who is there to serve, perform and

is too poor to refuse. The song could be seen to re-vision "Zip-a-dee-doo-dah" by presenting the things the song implicitly denies. This Remus-like character is undeniably struggling ("I've been waiting on the welfare line, the employment line, the gas line, since 9, now I'm waiting on the pawn shop line") and yet also determined, angry and perseverant ("walk on Niggers, walk on").

The song and the animated sequence that precedes it display a darker side of reality with an abrasive attitude that is controversial and blunt. In this respect it follows in the footsteps of 70s Blaxploitation films. If Remus is (partially) retained, he is no longer the overall framing device. In the film, the Brer Rabbit stories are framed by a live-action Blaxploitation film. Where *Song of the South* focused on a young white boy visiting his Grandmother's plantation and listening to Uncle Remus' stories, in *Coonskin* the Brer Rabbit tales are told against the backdrop of a prison-break. Preacherman (Charles

Still from *Coonskin*

Gordone) and Sampson (Barry White) attempt to break their partner, Randy (Philip Michael Thomas), out of prison. Randy hides by the prison wall ready to make his escape. He is accompanied by Pappy (Scatman Crothers), an older prisoner, who has come along for the ride. "This nigger hasn't been this side of the wall for 100 years" he says, "and what the fuck makes you think I ain't enjoying myself being here."

The two of them wait by the wall, but it isn't long until Paps is telling a story. "Hey Man, I just remember, I used to know three guys, just like you and your friends..."

Unlike the Disney and Harris versions, where the stories are being told to white children on a plantation, in this film the stories are told from a black person to a black person. Pappy, unlike Remus, is not a cheery Uncle Tom with a happy disposition. He is blunt, abrupt and to the point.

In this respect the film, like other Blaxploitation films, is presented from the trickster's point of view. Blaxploitation persistently addressed issues of ghettoised black communities and the crime, gangs and drugs that exist in them; *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), *Superfly* (1972), *Coffy* (1973). These films tended to focus on the underdogs, who were tricksters, setting traps in order to take vengeance, escape trouble or get what they want. In these films we meet characters like Sweetback, who, kills two corrupt cops and goes on the run, laying traps for those following him; Priest (*Superfly*), a cocaine dealer who tricks police and criminals to make and keep his money; *Coffy*, a nurse, who, after her sister is hospitalised due to a drugs overdose, decides to enact justice against the entire drug cartel by playing roles (using her sexuality and her cunning) to switch drug stashes and turn criminals against each other. Each character is not unlike

Still from *Coonskin*

the ultimate trickster, Brother Rabbit.

The animated sections of the film tell the story of Brother Rabbit, Brother Bear and Preacher Fox in Bakshi's own unique animated style. If Disney's Brer Rabbit had appeared cute and loveable, Bakshi's characters are exaggerative, crude and sometimes grotesque. Likewise, the slapstick is bloody, violence and graphic. Disney films have often been criticised for their use of racial caricature. Maybe one of the most famous is the black crows in *Dumbo* (1941), who appear with African-American accents and mannerisms. If this causes some offence, it seems not to be the overriding concern for Ralph Bakshi, who replicates the motif in *Fritz the Cat*. In fact, on the surface Bakshi's animations often appear more exaggerated, more grotesque, and potentially more offensive. What is whimsical and comical caricature in Disney, becomes a mixture of exaggerative satire, surrealist political commentary and grotesque real-

ism. It is almost as if, in order to confront us with the reality Disney films deny, Bakshi has to go further. Unlike the Disney film, *Coonskin* is intent on making us face racist prejudices and assumptions. If in Disney films racial caricatures can easily pass us by, Bakshi's films make us all too aware.

The animation follows Brother Rabbit and his associates Brother Bear and Brother Fox. In financial desperation they have had to sell their house to a city slicker, who has turned it into a pleasure house. Rabbit, Fox and Bear return to the house to pick up their money from the city slicker. The white sheriff that runs the town is also heading in the same direction. "All this niggers' town has to offer is some cheap booze and some women," he says as he heads for the pleasure house. However, finding his daughter working there, he draws a gun, only to receive a knife in his chest from Brother Rabbit.

Brother Rabbit, Brother Bear and Preacher Fox run to the car. The trio need to leave town, and the obvious place to head to is Harlem. When they arrive in Harlem, it is marred with poverty: Old man bones hunts through the trash, picking out things that whites have thrown out; Perl tells the story of her failed relationship with Malcolm the cockroach who left her because "It's always cold here and a few scraps found at your table ain't as good as the garbage down town. And there ain't no fear of the whole damn building falling down on our heads or junkies crushing you under foot." Meanwhile, in a more symbolic vein, a white Miss America, naked, but wrapped in the American flag, has blacks killed for making sexual advances towards her. The vision of America is one of poverty, injustice and exploitation dished out against America's social and economic outcasts.

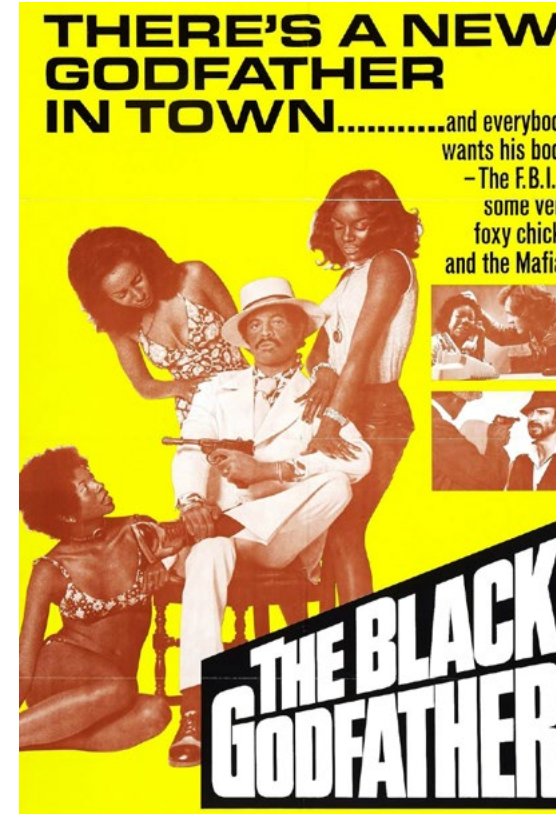
The trio arrive in Harlem and meet another problem: The black Jesus! Black Jesus is part revolutionary, part religious leader and part nightclub sensation. Black Jesus, we are told, gives people the power to kill whites. The indiscriminate hatred of whites continually rears throughout the film. Preacher Fox, at one point tells us that "Killing crackers, I guess that is okay any day." At another point, the black Jesus shoots images of John Wayne, Elvis Presley and Richard Nixon. Black Jesus, however, is not a real revolutionary. His aim is purely to make money. Black Jesus and his "revolutionaries" do not offer a genuine emancipatory revolution, but manipulate racial tensions and hatred to make a quick buck. The trio are not seduced. They see through Black Jesus' pseudo-revolutionary façade and start making trouble for him. But this doesn't mean that the trio are real revolutionaries. Brother Rabbit tells his accomplices that

he is "tired of trying to segregate, integrate and masturbate anymore." It is in this respect that neither Brother Rabbit nor Black Jesus is the genuine politically subversive tricksters. Their tricks are there to serve their self-interest.

It is not long before Black Jesus catches up with Brother Rabbit. Using the classic Brer Rabbit-reverse psychology technique ("Please don't throw me out that window ledge..."), Brother Rabbit escapes, then returns with Brother Bear and shoots Black Jesus dead. With Black Jesus gone, Brother Rabbit attempts to take over the racket in Harlem. He tells the gangster community "Black racket money stays in Harlem. No more Mafia, Police, Mayors, Senators, Judges or Presidents." It's our money up here let's keep it." He, however, has two barriers that he must first overcome before he can run the rackets in Harlem. The first is a cop called Mannigan, the second is the Mafia. Brother Rabbit must prove himself.

Mannigan is a corrupt and racist cop who takes a cut of the drugs and prostitution services in Harlem. Whilst he makes money off of crime in the black community, he has very little respect for this community. "Yeah I don't wash when I go up town that's for sure," he says. "Niggers ain't worth washing fa'."

He has two sidekicks, one of whom is black, but is wealthy and shares equal disdain for niggers: "Hay you should have seen this place I bought in Levittown. There isn't a nigger for forty miles" he says. When the three of them turn up in Harlem they find that their cut is no longer there. The rabbit has already taken it. Searching out the Rabbit, Mannigan finds himself alone in a club with a stripper. It is a trap! Before he has time to realise he finds himself dragged up, blacked up and



drugged up. Finding his colleges dead he shoots into the air fanatically. The police surround him and when he (albeit unintentionally) shoots at them. They shoot him dead.

His second target is the Mafia which is ran by the Godfather, a grotesque, deglamorised version of Marlon Brando's character. The Mafia family, however, have already heard of Brother Rabbit and attempt to use Preacher Fox and Brother Bear to get to him. They set up a boxing match they aim to capture the rabbit, but brother Rabbit is ahead of them and creates a tar baby version of himself. The Mafia fall for his trap and each find themselves stuck in the tar baby trap unable to

escape. Brother Rabbit is successful and takes over Harlem.

### Blaxploitation and the Trickster

Whilst *Coonskin* breaks with the problematic Remus character, the Rabbit brings issues of his own. The trickster, whilst no subservient, does not necessarily represent a genuine opposition to oppression. In *Coonskin* the poverty of Harlem manifests, not in the genuine attempt to achieve justice and equality, but in the use of revolutionary ideas by scam artists, the desire to indiscriminately kill whites, black crime against the black community, the black middle-class' rejection of the black underclass and bigoted corrupt white cops who feed off of injustice. It is in this setting that the trickster emerges, not as an emancipator,

but as a self-interested individual who feeds off of tensions for their own ends. The film demonstrates how poverty and oppression creates, not the "emancipated" and "empowered" heroes of Disney movies, but instead social divides, hatred and character flaws born out of a need for survival. Thus, whilst vehemently attacking racism, Bakshi is simultaneously critiquing the tensions and non-revolutionary power struggles that emerge in ghettoised life. In this context, *Coonskin* attempts to address the manner in which radical and revolutionary politics can be appropriated and misused. This theme, of course, runs throughout Blaxploitation itself. In *The Black Godfather*, the black Godfather (J.J.) wants Tony, the white

Mafia boss, out of his area. However, he needs the support of the “revolutionaries” to do this and meets with Diablo, a political militant, to garner support. The conversation between them is interesting as it demonstrates the tensions between the revolutionary left and the emerging bourgeois libertarianism. Diablo is not convinced. “The essence of our struggle is independence” he tells J.J. “We don’t like slave master no matter what colour they are.”

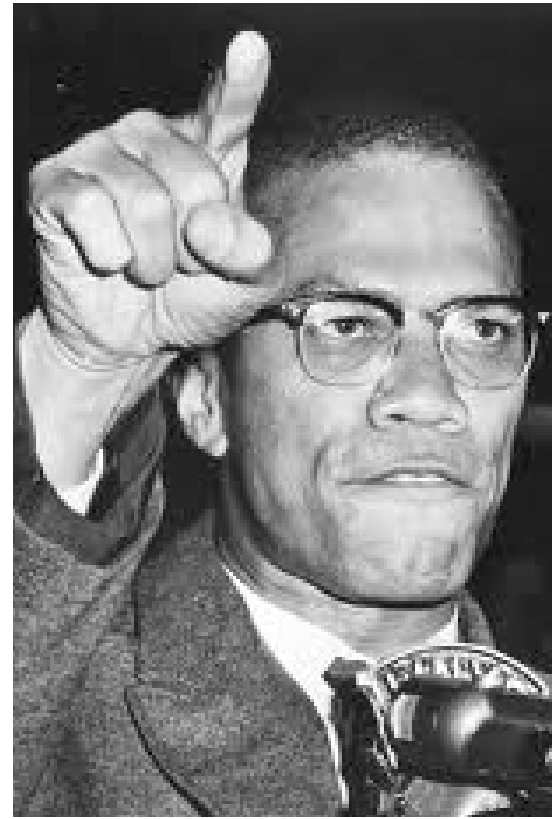
Diablo’s idealism only seems to make J.J. more impassioned. “Look I’m not going to justify corruption to you.” He says “It’s always been here and it always will be. What I am rapping to you about is power baby. I know what I am. And right or wrong people look up to me because they think I am a success. I’ve got what they’ve always wanted: money! Without it you’re nothing. Money buys dignity, poverty is a crime. Nobody asked you where you got your dollar; they ask you do you have it. That idealistic shit don’t pay your rent.” It is interesting to note how J.J.’s politics have more in common with the libertarianism of Ayn Rand, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan than the civil rights movements. In this sense, the trickster is not so much a militant tactically overcoming his master in the fight for independence, justice and equality, but the venture capitalist who buys dignity via money. J.J.’s sentiments are echoed in the civil rights politician from *Coffy*, who turns out to be involved because of a collaboration with corrupt police and the fact that he is taking his cut of the drug racket.

When asked where his alliances lay he tells the cops “For Christ sake, black, brown or yellow, I’m in it for the green, the green buck.” His words suggest that money, to a large extent, is colour-blind.

This claim mirrors Diablo’s belief that it doesn’t matter what colour the slave master is. Money might not care what colour the hand that spends it is, but nor does it care who it crushes and who it saves. Money does not discriminate, it oppresses indiscriminately. Tricksters, at their worst, are simply yet another oppressor, out to use the situation to their advantage.

Tricksters, at their best, genuinely subvert, challenge and confront. They make genuine emancipation possible or they, at least, help us perceive the brutality and injustice in the world. In this respect, Bakshi himself is a trickster. Bakshi appropriates racist iconography and uses it to provoke and confront difficult issues surrounding racism. He turns Disney on its head, revealing what was essentially denied. In this respect, Bakshi stands with the best of Blaxploitation. Unlike Disney films, Blaxploitation doesn’t start with the façade of equality in an unequal world. The films are often violent, bold and confrontational. For example, *Sweetback* opens with the quote “Sire, these lines are not a homage to brutality that the artist has invented, but a hymn to reality” and follows this with “This Film is dedicated to all the brothers and sisters who have had enough of the Man.” This is Blaxploitation at its best: On the one hand, its demand is not brutality for its own sake, but reality. On the other hand it calls for a united opposition to authority and oppression (the Man). In this respect it transcends the mere exploitation flick, which simply uses shock, horror, sex, violence and gore to bring the audience in. It produces, instead, a commentary on the world.

Bakshi wanted to create something beyond a mere exploitation, something that had more to do with facing reality



Malxom X

and challenging authority, than simply violence for thrills. It is in this respect that Bakshi seems somewhat critical of Blaxploitation and claims that he wasn’t actually making a Blaxploitation film at all.

So the truth of the matter is that I used the Blaxploitation films. I wasn’t making fun of the Blaxploitation films so much as I was using it to sell my political film.<sup>xxvi</sup>

In Bakshi’s mind the film is a political satire. In this respect Bakshi attempts to confront us with the racism that underscores everyday life and which is covered over in a cinema obsessed with

cute family fun, diversity and empowerment. Like many of the films lumped into the category of trash and exploitation, *Coonskin* is not so much pure exploitation, but attempts to transcend it; to use exploitation tropes to comment on humanity, poverty and racism. What makes trash and exploitation genres exciting are that they often do precisely this. The merging, with carnivalesque showmanship, of controversy, brutality and bad taste may, at times, manifest as a kind of reactionary sideshow distraction. However, at its best, it allows us to address questions and issues in a manner that is far more honest than the Disneyland conglomeration of family fun, multiculturalist diversity and reactionary conservatism. In this respect, the history of trash and exploitation cinema could be described as trickster

cinema. Trickster cinema mirrors that of the trickster character themselves; at its worst it is a reactionary cinema, which uses shock and sensationalism to make a quick buck, but at its best it is radical and subversive. In contrast, the history of Disney films could be described as a tradition of Remusification. In the hands of the Disney corporation a tale of mass genocide becomes a tale of interracial love (*Pocahontas*, 1995), a Dickens tale of child poverty and exploitation becomes a tale of cute cats and dogs and how rich and poor can unite to fight corrupt capitalists (*Oliver & Company*, 1988) and a tale set on a plantation can become a tale of multicultural harmony (*Song of the South*).



Top: Still from *Oliver & Company*  
Above: Still from *Pocahontas*

Malcolm X, with allusions to Brer Rabbit, tells us that the white conservatives don't hide their racism. "They are like wolves; they show their teeth in a snarl that keeps the Negro always aware of where he stands with them. But the white liberals are foxes, who also show their teeth to the Negro but pretend that they are smiling. The white liberals are more dangerous than the conservatives; they lure the Negro, and as the Negro runs from the growling wolf, he flees into the open jaws of the 'smiling' fox." Disney films are like smiling foxes, who frame

Brer Rabbit in the cutesy façade of multicultural togetherness, but it is a trap. The cunning fox plaster its multicultural glee to hide his bigotry beneath. Trickster cinema, at its best, works to expose this. It serves to break through the liberal/Disney façade and make radical, honest, and maybe emancipatory subversion, possible.

i. Joel Chandler Harris, *New Stories of the Old Platation* (Sourced at [http://archive.org/stream/toldbyuncleremus00harr/toldbyuncleremus00harr\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/toldbyuncleremus00harr/toldbyuncleremus00harr_djvu.txt))

ii. Maurice Rapf was a screenplay writer and communist, who was blacklisted in the McCarthy era. Walt Disney asked Rapf to help rewrite the original script of *Songs of the South* which Walt Disney, himself, believed to be potentially anti-black. According to Rapf, Disney hired him because he was "against 'Uncle Tomism'" and "a radical." Unfortunately Rapf was unable to exert a positive effect on the script and was fired as a result of differences with the original writer. For more on the controversies which framed the making of *Songs of the South* see Kim Korkis, *Who is afraid of Song of the South and other Forbidden Disney Stories*. (Theme Park Press: Florida. 2012.)

iii. Maurice Rapf quoted in Kim Korkis, *Who is afraid of Song of the South and other Forbidden Disney Stories*. (Theme Park Press: Florida. 2012.) p.20

iv. Ralph Bakshi interviewed in *Reflections on Blaxploitation: Actors and Directors Speak* edited by David Walker, Andrew J. Rausch and Chris Watson (Maryland: Scarecrow Press Inc. 2009) p.2

v. Bernard Wolfe, "Uncle Remus & the Malevolent Rabbit" in *Mother Wit From the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*. Edited by Alan Dundes. (University of Mississippi. 1973/1981) p. 536

vi. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*. (London: Pluto Press. 2008) p.134

vii. Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus, his Songs and his Sayings*. (Kindle Books) Location 34

viii. Ibid Location 120

ix. Wolfe, "Uncle Remus & the Malevolent Rabbit" p531

x. Maurice Rapf, for example, proposed something different. He tells us, "My script was terrible, I've looked at it since. The script is just as racist as the film, although there is a lot that is different. Disney didn't make it clear that the film wasn't about slavery and that it was set during Reconstruction. In my script, I had the white family poverty-stricken. And that's a lot different from what you see on the screen. Their house in the film is immaculate, very white -it's a white mansion on a plantation. The women wear different dresses every time you look at them. I indicated in my script very clearly that they should be threadbare because they lost the war, also the whole reason for the father leaving the kid in the first place is very different in the final script from mine. In mine he leaves because they haven't got enough money to pay the people who are working there. He goes to Atlanta to get some money so he can pay the blacks who work on the farm. That's different.

xi. He even says [in Rapf's script], "We gotta pay these people. They're not slaves." So when Remus is told he can't read anymore stories to the boy. He picks up his things. He's mad. He is not going to get the father, he's leaving. He says, "I'm a freeman; I don't have to take this." (Kim Korkis, *Who is afraid of Song of the South and other Forbidden Disney Stories*. p.19-20)

xii. Frederick Douglas quoted in Kim Korkis, *Who is afraid of Song of the South*. p.48. See Bradley Tuck, *Just a spoonful of sugar... The Dialectics of Work and Play in Walt Disney's Mary Poppins* (One+One Filmmakers Journal. Issue 6. 01/04/2011)

xiii. Douglas Brode, *Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment*. (Austin: University of Texas Press. 2005) p.54-55

xiv. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse of the Origin and Foundation of Inequality Among Mankind*. (Kindle) Location135

xv. Rousseau, *A Discourse of the Origin and Foundation of Inequality* Location 139

xvi. Jean Jacques Rousseau, "The Social Contract" in *The Social Contract and First and Second Discourses*. Edited by Gita May, Robert N. Bel-

lah, David Bromwich and Conor Cruse O'Brian (New Haven, Yale University Press. 2002) p.189

xvii. *ibid*  
xviii. Brode, *Multiculturalism and the Mouse*. p.57

xix. See Brode, *Multiculturalism and the Mouse*. p.59

xx. Korkis, *Who is afraid of Song of the South*. p. 20

xxi. Wolfe, "Uncle Remus & the Malevolent Rabbit" p536.

xxii. Brode, *Multiculturalism and the Mouse*. p.61

xxiii. The wikipedia page notes accusations of anti-Semitism and racism levelled at Disney and Disney films, and mentions specifically "Mickey's Mellerdrammer, in which Mickey Mouse dresses in blackface; the "black" bird in the short *Who Killed Cock Robbin*; *Sunflower*, the half donkey/half black centaurette with a watermelon in *Fantasia*; the feature film *Songs of the South*; the Indians in *Peter Pan*; and the crows in *Dumbo*." It also, however, goes on to quote Neil Gambler saying "Walt Disney was no racist,...] He never, either publicly or privately, made disparaging remarks about blacks or asserted white superiority. Like most white Americans of his generation, however, he was racially insensitive." see Wikipedia page [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt\\_Disney#cite\\_ref-122](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt_Disney#cite_ref-122) (sourced 05/10/2013)

xxiv. Brode, *Multiculturalism and the Mouse*. p.59

xxv. Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wilde-oscar/soul-man/>

xxvi. Bakshi Interviewed in *Reflections on Blaxploitation* p.3

xxvii. Malcolm X, "White Liberals" Track 9 on *Malcolm X: The Best of His Speeches* (Audio). (Stardust Records 2007) p.247





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