**Video Script**

**Lecture 30 – Black Independent Cinema**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

The theme for our lectures this week is “Indie Cultures.” What does that mean? Well, this week we’re looking at three film movements that got their start in the 1960s/early 1970s: Black independent cinema, Chicano cinema, and the Austin film scene.

These three movements, communities, cultures (however you want to understand them) all operate at a distance from big Hollywood studios and the mainstream film industry—though there are touchpoints. Sometimes a film from one of these movements breaks big, or a director will go on to work in Hollywood.

**Key Concepts**

Today, we’re going to focus on Black Independent cinema. Here are your key concepts. Within the module, you’ll have two required links and a whole bunch of optional ones if you’re curious about the many films and filmmakers we’ll talk about today.

**Pt. 1/Pt. 2**

Today’s lecture on Black independent cinema will have two parts. In the first, **[ANIMATION]** we’ll talk about blaxploitation film—a genre of low-budget sexy, violent, sometimes quite funny films that revolved around urban Black characters and were only sometimes made by Black filmmakers. **[ANIMATION]** In the second part, we’ll look at a separate Black independent film movement sometimes called the L.A. Rebellion, driven by a group of filmmakers at UCLA who were, in part, reacting against blaxploitation.

These two film movements of the 1970s produced very different kinds of films. But in their own ways, both mobilized a response to how little Hollywood had historically cared about Black audiences and Black stories, and how little access Black filmmakers had to the Hollywood machine.

**Blaxploitation**

So, let’s jump into our first part—blaxploitation. This might be a genre of film you’re well-acquainted with. It might be something you heard of relatively recently (the Netflix film *Dolemite Is My Name* has helped raise the profile of blaxploitation). It might also be a totally new term.

**Era**

First, let’s connect some dots. **[ANIMATION]** If we think about 1970s network television, we’re thinking in no small part about the Era of Relevancy—those Normal Lear shows like *Maude* and *Good Times.* And while these shows did a lot in terms of broadening television both in terms of representation and style, the era of relevancy was in no small part about market segmentation. What did young people want to see? The answer was grittier shows that were more reflective of the real world and its problems.

**[ANIMATION]** And if we think about 1970s Hollywood film, we’re thinking in no small part about the New Hollywood wave of filmmakers. And while they too did a lot in terms of broadening film, taking advantage of that newly relaxed rating system, New Hollywood was *also* about market segmentation. What did young people want to see? The answer was grittier films that were more reflective of the real world and its problems.

**Blaxploitation**

Blaxploitation was also, in its way, about market segmentation. There was an opportunity to make money from Black audiences who were not seeing Black people represented well—or mostly, at all—by Hollywood films.Blaxploitation is a little more complicated than the simple supply and demand of Era of Relevancy programming or New Hollywood film, however.

**[ANIMATION]** When someone says “blaxploitation,” they’re almost certainly referring to low-budget independent films, set in Black communities, which revel in sex and violence (kind of like pre-Code cinema did). But when we look at who’s *making* these films, it’s hard to categorize blaxploitation solely as a Black independent genre. That’s because the people making blaxploitation movies include both **[ANIMATION]** white producers and filmmakers eager to tap this underserved Black market, and Black filmmakers who are looking for a way to speak to Black audiences.

The audiences for blaxploitation film are likewise split. On the one hand, there are **[ANIMATION]** Black audiences who were excited to see a Black people and stories on screen, and who enjoyed the salacious and goofy spirit of some of these films. On the other, there were Black audiences upset with what they saw in these films and who thought they reflected poorly on Black folks at large.

Think back to our discussion of polysemy— I think it applies here beautifully. Blaxploitation films are often a combination of progressive and regressive, sexist and feminist, provocative and silly, and thus, people see different things in them.

**Blaxploitation**

But what *is* a blaxploitation film? Scholar Novotny Lawrence says you can recognize a blaxploitation film through a handful of key characteristics: “black protagonists, black supporting characters, predominantly black urban settings, black-themed storylines, white villains, funky rhythm and blues soundtracks, and displays of violence and black sexuality.”

**Equation**

Taking it back one step further…let’s start with the word itself. The term blaxploitation is the combination of two terms: black, and exploitation. But what do we mean by exploitation when we talk about film?

**Exploitation definition**

Exploitation doesn’t refer to the way the actors or crew were treated, or anything to do with the production of the film. Film scholar Mikal J. Koven describes it this way **[ANIMATION]:**

*“…most forms of exploitation cinema—for example, splatter movies or pornography—exploit images of violence and/or sexuality; the raison d’être of the films is the presentation of sex or violence….These filmmakers exploit our desire to watch violence and/or sex, and even if producers could get away with it they would give us nothing more than scenes of what we’ve paid to see.”*

So, in other words, what’s exploited in an exploitation film is the most primal audience desires: how much we love to see sex, and how much we love to see gore.

**AIP**

One of the key production companies associated with exploitation is AIP, American International Pictures, an independent production company co-founded by one Samuel Z. Arkoff.

**Arkoff**

Arkoff and a partner founded AIP in 1954 and grew a reputation for producing low-budget movies in salacious niche genres, like the outlaw biker film. Arkoff, in fact, developed what he said was a foolproof formula for a successful film based on his name. **[ANIMATION]** The ARKOFF Formula dictated that a film should have:

*Action (exciting drama)*

*Revolution (controversial themes)*

*Killing (or other violence)*

*Oratory (notable, quotable speeches)*

*Fantasy (audience gets to live fantasy)*

*Fornication (sex appeal)*

Who *doesn’t* want to see an Arkoff film, you know?

**Corman**

The other well-known figure associated with AIP is Roger Corman,the highly prolific director and producer of more than 400 low-budget exploitation films that had everything you could hope for—monsters! Slashers! Car chases! Boobs as far as the eye could see!

**[ANIMATION]** And I mean, there were a *lot* of boobs. A critic once wrote about Corman that “as a producer, he gave his filmmakers creative freedom, just as long as they peppered their films with marketable elements. As one filmmaker notes, he wrote notes in his scripts: ‘Breasts/nudity here?’”

**Why does this matter?**

So, why does the shlocky, lurid output of American International Pictures matter to the history of blaxploitation? **[ANIMATION]** Because AIP made many of the films most highly associated with the blaxploitation genre.

**[ANIMATION]** Remember, blaxploitation is an exploitation film starring and about Black people. **[ANIMATION]** But when these films were made by an exploitation studio like AIP, they were almost always helmed by a white director and they were conceived of *as an exploitation film first*. That means that the sexy, violent content took precedence over anything political or representational that these films were doing.

**Coffy**

No one personifies these AIP blaxploitation films better than Pam Grier, star of films like *Coffy* in 1973, where she plays a nurse out to get revenge on a crew of drug dealers whose stuff killed her sister…

**Foxy Brown**

…and *Foxy Brown*, from 1974, where she plays a woman out to get revenge a crew of drug dealers who killed her boyfriend. I’ll include a link to the incredible opening credits (which is what you see here) in the module. You’ll also watch a segment of an interview with Grier about her experience working in blaxploitation.

**Grier/Alexander**

A few slides ago, I mentioned ambivalent responses from Black audiences to blaxploitation films. Scholar Camille S. Alexander has explored exactly that ambivalence in an article called “Forget Mammy!” in which she argues **[ANIMATION]** that blaxploitation films like *Coffy* or *Foxy Brown* are both progressive and regressive when it comes to gender roles. In one way, blaxploitation’s tough female characters help to stamp out the pernicious mammy stereotype, or the controlling image of Black women in mainstream media as asexual, servile, and nurturing. Alexander calls the character Pam Grier plays “Mother Protectors,” or bad-ass women who fight on behalf of their community

**[ANIMATION]** On the other hand, though, these characters were still written in *exploitation films*. In *Foxy Brown*, for example, Pam Grier spends most of the movie “undercover” as a sex worker, and therefore very scantily clad. And Alexander reports that some Black women in the audience couldn’t accept the positive aspects of these strong female characters without also feeling degraded by how over-sexualized they were.

**Sweet Sweetback**

This is, however, a lecture on Black independent cinema. So, I want to shift from discussing AIP’s blaxploitation films—which was important to understanding the history of this genre—to look at blaxploitation films that were *actually made* by Black directors. The first is 1971’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song—*each time I do this lecture it’s an exercise in remembering exactly how many a’s and s’s are in that title.

This film was written, directed by, and stars Melvin Van Peebles. He was kind of a renaissance man in the 1960s, who’d worked abroad.

**Black Community**

When it came to *Sweet Sweetback*, Van Peebles wanted complete control over his film. He includes lots of Black people in front of and behind the camera—some he even trained on set. You can see in this screenshot of the credits his commitment to having a Black cast.

**Van Peebles**

The result is a dreamlike, experimental exploitation film. Some of the content is quite difficult. The story is about a man who was raised in a brothel and initiated into sex work at just twelve years old—controversially, Van Peebles cast his son in some of those brothel scenes. (His son, Mario Van Peebles, in fact went on to make a film *about* the making of *Sweet Sweetback*, in which he plays his father.)

Anyway, in the film, Sweetback is arrested for a murder he did not commit; the cops also pick up a Black activist as they are hauling Sweetback in. They beat the activist nearly to death, but Sweetback fights back and the two escape. Sweetback spends the rest of the movie on the run, often having to exchange sex for help.

**Sweetback Poster**

In the end, though, Sweetback is NOTkilled by the police. He escapes to Mexico and lives. This is why some critics argue that this isn’t a true exploitation film—because it doesn’t take absolutely every chance to show sex and violence on screen. A real exploitation film wouldn’t be able to pass up the chance to pump its main character full of lead. And that difference, in fact, is evidence of how Black directors created films in this genre that were more political, and more pointed than the ones made by white directors.

Regardless of its political significance, the exploitation elements of the film still earned it an X rating, **[ANIMATION]** which was then incorporated into the advertising—as you can see here, it says it was “Rated X by an All White Jury.” And the film was divisive with Black audiences, too. Historian Lerone Bennet Jr. challenged the film in *Ebony* magazine, arguing that it glorified poverty, violence, and the sexual exploitation of children. Huey P. Newton of the Black Panthers, on the other hand, called it “the first truly revolutionary Black film ever made.”

**Shaft**

Who’s the cat that won’t cop out when there’s danger all about? It’s *Shaft*! Right on…

The second film I want to talk about is 1971’s *Shaft*, which was in fact a Hollywood production (not an independent one). Aside from having one of the greatest theme songs ever recorded, which I’ve just mangled for you, it depicts a rogue Black cop and, in 1971, that’s pretty revolutionary. It succeeds in rewriting the detective film with a Black man and Blackness at its center.

**Shaft (again)**

Scholar Novotny Lawrence argues that the character of Shaft, portrayed by Richard Roundtree, was **[ANIMATION]** an “innovative construction of black masculinity” who can confidently move between the social spheres of Manhattan while also experiencing moments of bigotry like being passed up for a white passenger while trying to hail a cab.

And *Shaft* certainly takes advantage of the sexiness of exploitation film—but it’s a radical to have a film revolve around a sexually liberated Black man. Black male sexuality has been vilified throughout American history—it’s a main plot point in *Birth of a Nation*, for example—and men have been lynched for it. For Shaft to be a sexy, and sexually self-determined, Black man is representationally important.

**Gordon Parks**

*Shaft* was directed by Gordon Parks, a renowned *Life* magazine photographer who was called, at the time, “Hollywood’s lone black director.” I include him and this film in the lecture because, like Van Peebles, Parks insisted on diversity behind the camera as well as in front of it. Building a predominantly Black crew pushed back against Hollywood’s most engrained production structures.

And as scholar Novotny Lawrence noted, Hollywood or not, the film was imbued with the Black Power philosophies and politics of the 1960s and 1970s…

**Remake**

…something you *don’t* see when you compare the 1971 *Shaft* to its 2000 reboot. Rewritten by a white script doctor, Shaft becomes hollow Hollywood caricature. He is stripped of his revolutionary sexuality and the film itself is stripped of its diversity—despite director John Singleton’s efforts, just five out of 125 crew members were Black. It also shifts from blaxploitation’s theme of fighting oppression to Black characters fighting Latinx ones.

The distance between the 1971 *Shaft* and its reboots helps demonstrate the effectiveness of Gordon Parks’s independent spirit, even while working within the Hollywood machine.

**Dolemite**

Finally, I want to touch on the 1975 independent film *Dolemite*, which was produced by, co-written by, and starred Rudy Ray Moore. It’s also a *comedy—*and if you can’t tell by this screenshot…

**Dolemite GIFs**

…I thought these gifs might help. Dolemite tells the story of a pimp/nightclub owner serving a prison sentence after being framed. His fellow pimp and friend Queen Bee gets him out of jail to exact his revenge on a bunch of criminals and corrupt police officers.

It also includes a lot of absolutely nonsense kung fu, which you can see here on the right.

**Boom mic**

The film was ferociously independent, made for just $100,000 and totally financed by Moore. The main character was based on his on-stage comedy routine, where Moore would deliver rhyming, *filthy* stories about a man named Dolemite—a style that influenced and was sampled on early hip-hop records.

Because of its limited budget and the crew’s relative inexperience, the film is rough, for sure. **[ANIMATION]** The boom mic is constantly in the shot, for example.

**Aisha Harris quote**

So, let’s summarize. I’m going to read a little bit of a piece written by New York Times writer Aisha Harris on the release of the Netflix film *Dolemite is my Name*, which fictionalized the making of *Dolemite*. She took the opportunity to reflect on the complicated history of blaxploitation films, and beautifully summed up exactly the issues we’ve been exploring here:

**[ANIMATION]** At the time and for many years after, the films were wildly popular — and polarizing. There were many reasons to speak out against them: They almost always depicted black people in impoverished settings populated by pimps, prostitutes and drug dealers; they often wrapped the idea of black power in a superficial depoliticized bow; and, as the genre became more popular, black representation behind the scenes became minimal.

**[ANIMATION]** Even some of the stars of the genre expressed a measure of regret over their participation: “The stereotypes that we have are often what we perpetuated ourselves,” Pam Grier, the star of “Foxy Brown,” said…“I broke them, but I also created some, because everyone thought a black woman is a whoop-your-butt sister all the time.”

**[ANIMATION**] Still, for a brief period, black performers were getting steady work. Audiences were seeing more black people on screens than ever before, and thanks to characters like John Shaft, Foxy Brown and Youngblood Priest in “Super Fly,” they were finally the heroes (and antiheroes).

So, what I’ve tried to focus on here is how Black filmmakers and actors used the exploitation genre—a genre not specifically created with Black audiences in mind—to wedge open a space for Black stories. What would happen, though, if Black filmmakers built a movement from the ground up?

**Part 2**

That’s where the L.A. Rebellion comes into the conversation.

**Catalog 1**

For this lecture, I’ve asked you to do a different kind of reading—I asked you to skim through the catalogue for a museum exhibition about the L.A. Rebellion held at UCLA in 2011.

**Catalog 2**

If you’ve never seen one before, an exhibition catalog usually contains a few essays about the artists on display, and then a list of all the works in the exhibit—in this case, because we’re talking about filmmakers, it’s a list of films that they showed and images from them. I’d like you to read an essay or two, maybe some of the film descriptions, and look at the images.

Why? Because the films of the L.A. Rebellions are almost *entirely impossible to access*.

**Quote**

An essay from that catalog helps explain why. **[ANIMATION]** It describes the L.A. Rebellion movement this way:

*“At a particular time and place in American cinema history, a critical mass of filmmakers of African origin or descent together produced a rich, innovative, sustained and intellectually rigorous body of work, independent of any entertainment industry influence. This, in the interest of realizing a new possibility for “Black” cinema, stated in its own terms on the good authority of its creators, and sensitive to the real lives of Black communities in the U.S. and worldwide.*”

The time and place they’re talking about is **[ANIMATION]** UCLA in the 1970s and 1980s, when a bunch of young Black film students wanted to explore what Black cinema could truly be without the demands of Hollywood. And because so many of these films were made by students, they were rarely distributed, poorly preserved and, in many cases, lost. That’s why the descriptions and images in the catalog are the best I can give you, along with some links I’ve cobbled together in your module.

**Children**

So, we know that the L.A. Rebellion was a group of young Black filmmakers at UCLA, trying to define a wholly Black cinema. What did they come up with?

L.A. Rebellion Zeinabu (ZAYN-a-boo) irene Davis outlined handful of things that drew this diverse group of filmmakers together. She said **[ANIMATION]** their films and their filmmaking were in opposition to both Hollywood and blaxploitation. **[ANIMATION]** They wanted to create an alternative space for informed, relevant, and unfettered Black expression that reached audiences without being routed through Hollywood.

**[ANIMATION x 2]** Their films were interested in representing everyday life and preserving black culture and history on film. **[ANIMATION]** They did this not by reusing the conventions of Hollywood film, or a preexisting genre like exploitation, but **[ANIMATION x 2]** by creating a wholly new aesthetic and looking to global cinemas in places like Cuba, Africa, and Brazil for relevant advice.

**[ANIMATION]** The style they invented was quiet, privileging the duration of a shot. **[ANIMATION]** Their films were paced more slowly than Hollywood film and relished the small and specific details of their characters’ lives. **[ANIMATION x 2]** They emphasized the dignity of their characters and often used groups and communities to tell their stories rather than one individual. **[ANIMATION]** They celebrated the African diaspora by incorporating pan-African music, clothes, dance and art. **[ANIMATION]** And finally, Davis says that they trusted the audience’s intelligence, believing they would be willing travel slowly with them, and to view their characters with empathy and understanding.

**Charles Burnett**

Briefly want to touch on just two of the filmmakers of the L.A. Rebellion—perhaps the best known among them. The first is Charles Burnett, who in 1978 directed the feature film *Killer of Sheep*, beautiful images from which I’ve been using throughout this lecture.

**Leaping**

The film describes life in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles in the late 1970s using all of the values of L.A. Rebellion filmmaking – it’s quiet, reflective, focused on the small moments of everyday life…

**Boys**

…that add up to a big picture of this community.

**Stan**

It revolves mostly around Stan, who works in a slaughterhouse, but it’s too simple to say its his story. Through Stan, we walk through life in this community, quietly seeing all the ways that poverty holds them in place: a car breaks down, work is exhausting, relationships are strained, children must be taken care of. But there are beautiful moments too—a warm coffee cup, dancing with your partner.

**Woman**

The film was made for just $10,000 as Burnett’s thesis film at UCLA, and three years later won a prize at the Berlin film festival. But it was hardly ever seen due to music licensing issues—Burnett wanted to incorporate culturally significant music, like Dinah Washington and Earth Wind & Fire, but could not afford to license its use for wide distribution. It is finally available for rental and download now, and I urge you to check it out.

**Julie Dash**

Finally, I want to touch on Julie Dash. Her work, from its very earliest days as a student at City College of New York, then a fellow at the American Film Institute, and then a graduate student at UCLA, has been interested in depicting Black women’s lives on screen.

**Four Women**

Her 1975 experimental film *Four Women*, set to a Nina Simone song of the same name, won a prize at the Miami Film Festival and is thought to be the first experimental film directed by a Black woman.

**Daughters**

Dash is best known for her 1991 independent film *Daughters of the Dust*, the production of which she financed with a grant from PBS.

**Woman**

Set in 1902, it tells the story of three generations of Gullah women deciding between their way of life on the Sea Islands off the coast of Georgia, or a more modern life on the mainland.

**Tree**

The film is known for its dreamlike, circular storytelling, its use of Gullah dialect, and for its gorgeous cinematography…

**Lemonade**

…which you can see influenced Beyonce’s 2016 visual album, *Lemonade*. Like Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep*, *Daughters of the Dust* was revolutionary—the first feature film directed by a Black woman—and like *Killer of Sheep*, it languished in licensing limbo. These filmmakers had to work outside the system to bring Black life to the screen in a way that felt authentic to them; in doing so, they sacrificed the almost automatic systems of distribution and preservation Hollywood has put in place for its pictures.

**Quote**

I’d like to end here by plugging this book, which is available for free to you through the UT library if you’re interested in learning more about the *many, many* other filmmakers of the L.A. Rebellion. In the introduction, the editors point out that sometimes, blaxploitation and the Rebellion filmmakers were at odds with each other. But when you home in on blaxploitation films actually made by Black directors, there’s something there that unites them with the films of the L.A. Rebellion—**[ANIMATION] they reflect a commitment to telling their stories in a way that rejects mainstream methods of representing African Americans and their communities.**