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Black heroes and heroines in cinema. Representations of Afro-American identities in the "Blaxploitation" movies

ABSTRACT. The cinematic genre of Blaxploitation is a significant example of how the popular culture influences certain identity patterns. In this case the this relation is being examined on the issue of contemporary Afro-American identities. This paper attempts to answer the question of the mechanism of identity construction in the context of new media, and cinema in particular. Thus the Blaxploitation movies are being regarded here as a phenomenon which is in large extent typical for other identity constructions in the context of a global cultural change occurring in the last decades in the West.

KEYWORDS: Blaxploitation, cinema, Afro-American identities, popular culture, blackness

The cultural constructions of identity

When we speak of modern (or postmodern) day identities, we usually include in our views the image of a cluster; a complex construction made by our life experience, knowledge, or socio-cultural factors. It's building a consistent whole out of bits of various content, not necessarily logical in their particular character, but usually coherent enough to the people who share them. It is a specific construction of needs, desires, and means to achieve them through agency in a socio-cultural context we currently live in. The constructive approach towards building the self is therefore the most popular among identity theories. According to the most of them, the process of constructing one's identity is a slow, but steady ongoing mechanism of acceptance and rejection in relation to selected elements of the socio-cultural *milieu*. However, this phenomenon of identities emerging from the processes of social, economic or political emancipation in the 1960's has been made by a steady and constant flow of certain elements, which did not fit quite well into norms and values of Western societies in terms of high culture, elitarism or

bourgeoisie morality. However, the widespread acceptance of those elements through proliferation of a new cultural standard had contributed to the legitimization of pop-culture as the basis for identity building. These new pop-cultural identities are hybrid in their nature and dynamic in their social placement. They attract nowadays attention from many scholars and become an object of study within various disciplines. Simultaneously they strive for the creating a new scientific approach, which would be able to grasp the quickly changing object and deliver a satisfying answer to the question on the nature of contemporary Western societies and culture, as well the place of the self in interpersonal relations structuring the social system. Such a new approach is often associated with the Anglo-Saxon tradition of cultural studies represented by Stuart Hall, or John Fiske, but on the other hand cultural studies became with the passing years also a fashionable excuse for a lack of confidence in traditional research methods in the study of culture. Nevertheless, constructivism of cultural studies remains today as a one of the most significant approaches towards the problem of modern identities, especially in the context of the influence of new media and cinema on the way we see ourselves.

Social constructivism in identity theory tackles in the first place the process of identity building. The manifestations of identities are being presented mostly as an emanation of this process or a specific post-processing of the identity image in the laboratory of sociology and other humanities. Putting identity into practice (and the inclusion of the social praxis theory in general) was for a long period of time of secondary importance to major figures in the study of self identification, like Henri Tajfel, the father of the social identity approach. His theory of identity has been focused on the cognitive aspect of identity construction—the emergence of a specific inner space through relations with other members of our own group and other groups. For Tajfel, as well for John Turner, identity was a constantly changing mirror of the social reality surrounding the self. Their approach limited however identity to an object of manipulation from the side of outer factors, i.e. society. Both scholars were convinced of the importance of this social determinism. Individuals were put into a framework of institutions, norms, values at the same time stripped from their agency and role in creating what makes society work.

Of course the picture of identity presented here is a strict constructive one, although it is by some taken for granted. Its limitations lie upon

the assumption, or more upon a reduction to the imaginary sphere, which is being often detached from the reality surrounding the original phenomena and shifting towards the ideological field. The strict constructivists approach is therefore a reduction to a certain image of identity, neglecting the aspect of relations of self with other subjects. Some critiques of the constructivists approach say that, culture is being treated here as something, which is falls into the debate on the opposition of the natural and cultural order, immediately taking the position on the side of culture pushing outside the debate what is belonging to biology. On the other hand the arguments of non-constructivists also tend to push the discussion onto the field of modernity/post-modernity issue and simultaneously reject the importance of the symbolic turn, which became visible on a global scale few decades back. These, and other similar polemics on socio-cultural dynamics of today seem to dominate the current debates. What becomes important in the condition of contemporary reality is the fact, that both mentioned approaches take the phenomenon of modern identities as their object of study in the context of the crisis of traditional self-identification patterns delivered by the society and culture.

Afro-Americans and the critical trajectories of modernity

It's quite clear today, that the debate on the cultural crisis of modernity and cultural critique emerged from that discourse started to spread across the Western hemisphere in the 1950's. It was a time of a new confrontation after World War II. This time it was a clash not between nations, but the old generation perceived by the youth as an embodiment of conservatism, false morality or various ideologies, which were reproduced by the existing order to maintain the socio-political *status quo* of the ruling class. Mostly in the United States and Western Europe, the postulates of the Frankfurt School of sociology pointed out directly the existence of a significant gap between was is now and what was back then, in the times of grand ideas and philosophical narratives. Theodor Adorno's and Max Horkhiemer's *Dialectics of Enlightenment* had a deep impact on the minds of young people in academic campuses from Berkeley to Columbia. The significance of the critical approach, which emerged among scholars and intellectuals had on the other had less influence on

what was happening on the streets of American metropolis. Social and political unrest, like the Chicago riots in 1968 after the assassination of Martin Luther King or the events in the south part of the country regarding the actions against racial segregation, had shown that the time was right for a deep makeover of America's portrait as the land of the free. The conflict between generations thus became also a conflict of the traditional view on culture, with its emphasis on elite and high culture, and the counter-cultural movements which literally exploded in the 1960's. This phenomenon was especially visible in the transgressions related to American culture and society. United States became thus the center of these processes, and major American cities like New York or San Francisco were perceived by many as a specific *axis mundi* of the new world to come. In the 1960's America was on the edge of a cultural and social revolution. Everyone was supposed to be made a part of these revolutionary movements and some of American radical organizations, like for example the leftist urban guerilla *The Weather Underground*, had brought literally the war in Vietnam back home into American living rooms, streets and cities. American society was in turmoil and no one could turn back the clock again. Nevertheless the social aspect of this shift (in a structural sense) was not changing in the same speed as the cultural one. American society was reluctant in accepting the ideas postulated by youth subcultures, human rights activists, liberal intellectuals or organizations fighting for the rights of various minorities. In the last case, the mentioned reluctance was most of all related to the black Americans. On the other hand, the Afro-American movement gained the strongest influence among all movements of social discontent in that time and gave the process of change the needed momentum.

Afro-American culture was for a long period of time bound by deeply rooted views of the alleged inferiority of the Black Man. Blackness was not just skin color, but also a state of both—culture and nature. The racial discourse in America had its ties not only to racism understood as an ideology and social praxis, but also to the scientific discourse in the social sciences. The works of famous American scholars, like for example Franz Boas, were focused on delivering the answer to the role of race in the determination of all other aspects being. Boas was in this context a pioneer when it comes to the reconsideration of race more as a concept applied by people to a certain pattern of human behavior and the way people look, then a objectified determinant of intellectual competences. Boasian anthropology contributed to a clear breakthrough in the

field of study of race, presenting to a wider audience how troublesome is the data used by many to ground their own hypotheses on the lesser intellectual potential of Blacks. In his works, Boas had applied a new approach towards race and culture. This new academic lenses focused on the critique of racial formalism and racism as an ideology present in public life. As George Stocking states, Boas was faced this matter with a strong opposition, both in academic circles as dangerous instigator of change and as a German-Jewish immigrant in the still forming American society of the early 20th century (see: Stocking, 1982). However, his commitment to the dismantling the existing racial prejudice and racism based on pseudoscientific basis of physical anthropology is still regarded as one of the most important turning points in the American racial discourse.

Certainly Boas's contribution had a strong impact on the intellectual debates within the academia, but when it comes to a broader effect it had little significance in effective changing the social system. American society was (and in some extent still is) based on racial differences, or more precisely on taking race into account when it comes to drawing a line of inner differentiation within the American society. Racial prejudice and racism itself is still, as the recent events show, a part of the American contemporary social, cultural, legal, political and sometimes even economic debates. A good example of this presence is the case of a Harvard University professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., a famous Afro-American theorist of race and a specialist in American culture and literature. In 2009 he was arrested in his own home by a white Boston police officer, who didn't believed that Gates could own such an expensive house in a wealthy neighborhood of Boston and had to be a burglar, who had just entered the premises to commit a crime. The whole public debate regarding the Gates case, involving the president Barrack Obama, had contributed in the last years to a new interest in race as an important problem in the contemporary American society, who's foundations lie upon the idea of equality and appreciation of the category of difference.

Cinema as crucial instrument in the identity's toolbox

We have to face therefore the question, if the political achievements of the 1950's and the 1960's did change the American society in the way Martin Luther King had dreamt of? Or is still contemporary America

bound by its own struggle with race? The answer to this question may lay upon a certain aspect of the American pop-culture, specifically its cinematographic part. American cinema was always in some sense an instrument for measuring the social tendencies in this country. By looking at its most popular currents and the history of its genres we are able to reconstruct various socio-cultural contexts surrounding the transitions the American society had undergone throughout the 20th century. Popular culture, and cinema in particular, may be treated here as a specific reflection of what is important in the public discourse, although this mirror of the American society is not always accurate. It is more an emphasized image of the complex map of paths and ways Americans deal with social, political and cultural issues in terms of film fiction, literature or comics. Serious political topics and problems making the basis for popular movies are often taken in a non serious manner, through comedy and laughter, outside the elite and high culture esthetics, through kitschy images appealing to the viewer more than highbrow intellectual debates.

As race and racism became such an issue cinema responded without any hesitation to this pop-cultural call to arms. Afro-Americans were one of the most significant groups contributing in the 1960's to the cinematic revolution. Actually, they were the first minority group in the USA, which had gained widespread attention in the public sphere thanks to their influence of the new media, i.e. cinema and television. New media technology, which proliferated after 1945, had established also a new way of seeing things, including the picture of the rapidly changing American society. The film industry and Hollywood responded quickly with movies focusing on the younger generation and its problems with movies like Nicholas Ray's "Rebel Without a Cause". As a conclusion the real problem was, that these pictures were dealing with issues appealing to white young people living in a wealthy and quiet suburbia of major American cities. Movies, made under the control of big production studios, were perceived by many Afro-Americans as a prolonged arm of the white middle class. The plots and characters portrayed in this kind of Disney like cinema hardly tackled the problems important for the black community. These were two worlds which could not be brought together by any means; and when accidentally they did, the relations between them were based on old worldviews, fears and stereotypes from both sides alike.

The cinematic image of Afro-Americans
and it's dynamics

The traditional image of people of color was for a long period of time set in a tradition of the uneducated and often silly black maid; just like the character of Mammy played by Hattie MacDaniel in *Gone with the wind* (1939). Mammy was a cliché figure for many representations of blackness in early American cinema. It represented the Afro-Americans, as well the exotic "other" in more general terms (Sims, 2006, p. 31). She was an universal and symbolic persona of the black women and men working in many American households on one hand, and on the other she personified the superiority of white culture and its ability to tame the savage instincts of those, who didn't belong to the white upper class owning the film industry. This situation was characteristic to American cinema until the half of the 20th century. In the 1950's black actors appearing in these mainstream movies were given usually supporting roles of minor significance. Nevertheless, cinema changed as the American society had undergone slow, but steady transition into the age of the conflict in Indochina and student's revolts. People like for example Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier, were certainly new to the white audience, and movies like *Carmen Jones* (1954) in which the Bizet's Carmen was placed in the context of the American South and all actors were black, were a small step in the right direction. Also the portrait of the blacks in this movie had witnessed a radical makeover, possibly shocking to some through its extensive sensuality. The new generation of movie makers, which came into the spotlight in the 1960's, had shifted the interest of the American film industry more towards the voices of the yesterday's marginalized and exploited. Thus Afro-Americans were put in the middle of the cinematographic discourse in the decade of the Denis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969) and Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). Movies made by them were a manifesto of the black voice in political, social and cultural terms.

Social and institutional contestation, cultural rebellion and civic disobedience was new to many followers of Timothy Leary and readers of Jack Keruac's *On the Road*, but very much familiar to most Afro-Americans. The ideas of the black emancipation movement were in the 1960's ranging from methods of peaceful disobedience (for example through so called "sit ins" in public sphere and occupation of certain institutions), through religious awaking (the Nation of Islam), to militant

urban guerilla (like the Black Panthers organization). These various forms of agency had one thing in common. The situation of Afro-Americans had to change immediately and the actions of black activists, like Malcom X an others, were supposed to gain support of the whole black community in the United States, as well attract supporters among democratic and liberal whites. The identities shared by Afro-Americans in that time were also undergoing important changes. Their self-identification started to leave the image of former slaves, or low skilled farm and car factory workers in Mississippi and Detroit, and moved onto the field of political activism, education and economic success. This wide spread change in the way black Americans had looked at their own place in the American society was common by the end of 1960's. The next decade belonged to the Afro-American voice in American cinema, and this voice was to be heard not just in big cities ghettos, but also in the white suburbia. By the year 1970 being "Black" became not just a sign of ethnic marginalization and the need for emancipation, but it also became fashionable. From now on, a certain feeling of coolness has been attached to Afro-American culture, and cinema has adopted it through its language of images. More and more movies were dealing with the phenomena of a new Afro-American identity. The best example of how cinematic experience had dealt with this issue is being provided by the genre of so called "Blaxploitation" movies.

The popularity of "Blaxploitation" cinema in the 1970's is truly remarkable, when we take into account the fact, that through most of the time of it's presence it always was and still is related to Afro-American identities. On one hand the source of this popularity may lay in the historical context of the wider transgression of American identity in general. On the other hand, the "Blaxploitation" genre is very much alive even today because of its specific convention how to make movies. Most of the "Blaxploitation" movies were made outside Hollywood, or outside its system of large studios and production firms. They almost never had a big budget, or expensive special effects. This movie making "from below" is significant in understanding how this genre affected the American cinema in the 1980's and 1990's; sometimes even reaching back explicit to the "Blaxploitation" tradition, like in the case of Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* (1997). Movies, like famous *Shaft* (1971) by Gordon Parks had set a strict code for this kind of cinema in relation to the methods used, the way how the plot is being narrated, how the characters are being presented and who they are, or what types of sub-genres

it uses. "Blaxploitation" cinema used such conventions like film noir and classic crime movies, westerns, action and martial arts movies, horror, comedy and historical drama; sometimes mixing all of them into a new language how the story is being told on the screen. The unconventionality of the approach of Afro-American movie makers and the commercial success of their pictures has challenged in the same extent the mainstream film industry and the social and political status quo.

Blaxploitation genre
as a representation of black identities

The 1970's were the *belle époque* of "Blaxploitation" style in film and culture. At the same time this genre included (in the films made according to its unique structure) all the trashy facets of this decade, among others over-exposed esthetics of pop-art, camp in fashion, disco music, and glitter. It had put all of these elements into social and political terms of resistance and rejection of culture dominated by whites with its esthetic evaluation of what is art and what is kitsch. The opposition between blackness and whiteness visible in these movies is simultaneously a line drawn between the underclass people of color and middle or upper class elites. It's not surprising, that a large number of characters portrayed in "Blaxploitation" movies is shown as underdogs fighting their way, often in a violent manner, up the social structure. Gangsters and shady entrepreneurs, pimps, drug dealers and petty criminals are populating the screen in films like *Super Fly* (1972), *Black Ceasar* (1972), *Hit Man* (1972) or *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971). Moral doubts regarding their appearance and the violent and criminal way of living are being diminished by the goal they all attempt to achieve—to win the struggle for the pride of Black Man and the greater good of the local Afro-American community. The evil and the wicked are in most cases the whites—corrupt police officers and politicians or conservative businessmen with racist views. The monochrome morality had to be clear and the dominance of whites was supposed to be overthrown by street justice.

What was unjust was the social system Afro-Americans lived in, therefore the identification with the local community had built a strong intersubjective grid of relations not just on the screen but as well in real life. The black gangster was never really bad or evil. When he used vio-

lence it was never directed towards his own people. He was simply using the very same methods like the white oppressors in the past, symbolized by the people in charge of institutions responsible for pushing Afro-Americans beyond the morally accepted framework and into ghettos. Drug dealers portrayed in *Super Fly* were men of success, admired by some for their money and hated by many for the same reason. They desperately reached for the American Dream like many others before them, but within the social context and resources blacks were given by white majority. Even today, a popular rationalization of criminal acts committed by black Americans is being led by the argument, that drugs consumption and trafficking or crimes related to use of firearms are a consequence and a tool for ruling Afro-Americans by white elites who do not want them to become influential in traditionally white domains.

In the "Blaxploitation" movies even black police detectives and private eyes had a violent method of fulfilling their duties. When it comes to guns, fists and martial art techniques, Shaft (played by Richard Roundtree) or Foxy Brown (played by Pam Grier) knew how to use them well beyond the expectations of their counterparts. A good example of an Afro-American character of that kind was Jim Kelly, who played an important ally in fighting evil along the side of Bruce Lee in the famous kung-fu movie *Enter the Dragon* (1973). Roundtree, Grier and Kelly had become recognizable through their appearance as protagonists with unusual physical skills. These super hero characteristics were almost comic wise and even transferred onto comic book heroes twenty years later, when the black Spider Man and Black Falcon appeared on the pages of Marvel books. Main characters of these films were usually dripping with masculinity, often in a very grotesque way. The sexual attraction was shown as a instrumentalized relation between men and women. Emotional engagement was an unnecessary obstacle in achieving one's goal and the hustler became a popular figure in the "Blaxploitation" genre. Unreal appearance of black protagonists in the movies was irrelevant. What was important, was the fact that at last black Americans could express their own identity and pride.

As the genre got its hero, it also had to present to the viewer the cause the hero is fighting for. Certainly the social and political postulates includes in the "Blaxploitation" cinema were mostly clear for the black audience. American history had to be rewritten with the same urgency as the present reality had to change, giving Afro-Americans the chance to live beyond their social, political, economic, and cultural marginalization.

Blackness became a specific kind of identity shared at the same time by the audience and the characters on the screen. No matter if they were contemporary figures, or purely fictional like in *Blackula* (1972) or *Blackenstein* (1973). The identification of Afro-Americans with the "Blaxploitation" heroes was in the 1970's in some extent a way of dealing with reality. The rejection of the social realm was at the same time contributing to the acceptance of a new political dimension of pop-culture and cinema. Although the simple reversion of roles in the giving and receiving of oppression, using racial prejudice and stereotypes was criticized also by some Afro-American organizations (like the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* and the *National Urban League*) the influence of the "Blaxploitation" genre cannot be overlooked when we reconsider the processes of transitions of Afro-American identities in the second half of the 20th century. Its esthetics and form may be very well traced in many contemporary cultural phenomena in America of today, sometimes hidden behind the curtain of pop-cultural eclectic style of postmodern cinema.

Gender, sex and identity
in the Blaxploiation cinema

At this point we may also ask ourselves how the "Blaxploitation" genre shaped the those identities in the context of gender. It is obvious that sex roles played a significant part in emerging of the blackness discourse in the context of visuality, especially in the cinematic sense. If we look at the issue of gender representation and blackness in the movies of the 1970's a clear archetype comes to our eyes—blackness is mostly male. Male characters are being presented as young, bold, and holding a certain amount of power over the women and whites. Females are subordinated to that power in several ways. In the first place we see an exaggerated sexual attraction, which is loosely being associated with political power. The male character, no matter good or evil, is standing against the socio-political status quo set by the white society. The hustler and the cop do not differ much in this manner. Women seem to love their rebellious entourage and often follow their path by taking their fate on bodies in their own hands. Even the persona of Foxy Brown uses similar embodied power to get what she wants. Sexuality is therefore being instrumentalized as a highly efficient mean to achieve political goals, i.e.

emancipation of Afro-Americans. As we follow this interpretation we also observe a certain dynamics of gender representation in the described cinematic genre.

The first "Blaxploitaition" movies portrayed men and women in a very exaggerated and grotesque way. However, we have to take into account the fact that so was the whole blaxploitation universe at that time. Comic-like personas were therefore a logical transformation of the surrounding reality put on the screen for the (not just black) masses. Gender was in that context also transformed into a hyper-real sexuality, an über masculinity/feminity if we may say so. In this light the polarization of gender in the blaxploitation movies seemed to have a certain goal—to raise specific self-awareness of the members of the black communities in the United States. The manipulation of gender representations in pop-culture became an act of self-identification. Blackness became associated with masculinity, vitality, sexuality and strength. Combining gender, race, politics and social order had therefore a deep impact on the movies themselves an in consequence on the audience's perception of what was going on the screen and beyond it. Black gender had to be articulated in a certain fashion in order to highlight the critical problems of subordinated groups living in a dominant white society.

As Stuart Hall states in his article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", cinematic experience contributes vastly to the emerging of black identity (Hall, 1990). Hall puts his remarks in the context of post-colonial discourse on blackness, but he also summarizes the process of identity building itself through pop-culture. The British scholar assumes that identity is being constructed in two major ways. The first one, is being drawn from the idea of "one-ness", as Hall puts it. This classic post-colonial optics emphasizes the notion of an universal culture, which is being shared by everyone and hitherto creates a common identity pattern. This might be certainly ascribed to the idea of blackness in all of its complexity. Hall states in this matter that: "It is this identity which a Caribbean or black diaspora must discover, excavate, bring to light and express through cinematic representation" (Hall, 1990, p. 223).

On the other hand, identity is also being taken into account as an entity of a more complex nature. Hall describes that this approach towards identity "(...) recognizes that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather—since history has intervened—'what we have become'." (Hall, 1990, p. 225). Identity is there-

fore an ongoing project, a dynamic reality being negotiated through different means, for example popular culture. The cinema of "Blaxploitation" reflects very well this second approach when we speak of representations of blackness. As a cinematic genre, it puts itself into a specific socio-political context and is being defined by the transgressions of that context in a historical sense. Cultural identities have their own past, present and certainly some of them a future. In the case of Afro-American identities represented in the "Blaxploitation" movies it is more than obvious of what past and present we are speaking.

The picture of America in the 1970's portrayed in the "Blaxploitation" movies contributed extensively to the conceptualization of Afro-American identity in terms of esthetics, social roles, dynamics of social change, gender, and the political discourse. The question of how this phenomenon is alive today remains as a part of a larger problem—the shaping of cultural identities through pop-cultural means. Traces of movies, fashion, music or comics related to the "Blaxploitation" genre might be still found in the pop-cultural sphere, despite the obvious transitions that occurred in the American society for the last three decades. However, the issue of Afro-American identities is today being still discussed on several levels—starting from strictly academic debates and ending with a wide social discussion in the United States. This might lead us to the question, how the problem of emancipation, inequality or racism is being resolved on the level of social structure and social relations. I do not intend to provide a satisfying answer to it, but I do hope that the arguments delivered in this text cast some light on the entanglement of popular culture and black identity through the lens of cinema. The impact of "Blaxploitation" movies on the perception of blackness and gender is in contemporary American society clearly visible. Definitely this fact raises further questions that should be considered when we speak not just of identity of Afro-Americans, but on cultural identity *per se*.

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