

Research paper on an analytical on the film: cotton comes to harlem

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



For those with the eyes to look far past the Presidency, now in the hands of an African-American man, there is still an impending crisis within the U. S.; that is, an existing movement that continues to use Blaxploitation films as a means to accurately portray representative characterizations of African Americans. Although we are now well into the 21st century, this has been an on-going problem that was first put to society's attention by Ossie Davis. "Cotton Comes to Harlem" is one such movie that achieved legendary status, when it was released in 1970. By some, it is even considered a 'piece of history.' Were it released today, we could find many similarities that Blaxploitation films still continue to utilize.

While "Cotton Comes to Harlem" was not originally labelled a Blaxploitation film, it is now widely seen as the quintessential film of this type. However, many viewed this film to be an illustration of the academic and creative deficiencies of many African American films, because it mimics the dead humor of blackface minstrel comedy without social or dogmatic intent. Therefore, should "Cotton Comes to Harlem" be used as a cultural study or entertainment from an audience point of view? Cultural studies insists that culture must be studied within the social relations and system through which culture is produced and consumed, and that thus study of culture is intimately bound up with the study of society, politics, and economics. Cultural studies show how media culture articulates the dominant values, political ideologies, and social developments and novelties of the era. It conceives of U. S. culture and society as a contested terrain with various groups and ideologies struggling for dominance (Kellner 6). To determine whether "Cotton Comes to Harlem" was meant to engage an audience

through culture studies or for pure entertainment we must take a further look into the film's mise-en-scene and cinematography, and the intentions of the director and scriptwriters in order to make a valid hypothesis.

Blaxploitation was a genre created for the black and urban audiences which highlighted black unity and empowerment. Through this I will discuss the film elements of ' mis-en-scene' and ' cinematography' that Ossie Davis used both in scriptwriting and directorially, to shape a film that defied all that we knew about African American films. " Cotton Comes to Harlem" not only exploits the plight of the black man, but Davis took it one step further and actually ' made fun of' his own race. Taking a deeper look into the analytical elements of film within " Cotton Comes to Harlem" one can see why it gained legendary status through dramatic action, various camera shots, dialogue, and rhetoric and so on.

Within the cultural studies of " Cotton Comes to Harlem", Chester Himes attempted to raise awareness that African Americans need to tell the truth about the toxic effects of racism, even if it's painful for whites and blacks alike. Ossie Davis took that very sentiment and imbedded it in the film " Cotton Comes to Harlem". Through cinematic images of homicide, lust for women, a pitiful sense of weakness, nudity, arrogance, racial slurs and violence, came " Cotton Comes to Harlem".

Charles Himes, author of the novel version, commented on " Cotton Comes to Harlem":

" Whereas most of the blacks of the world don't particularly insist on having equality in the white community the American black doesn't have any other community. America, which wants to be a white community, is their

community, and there is not the fact that they can go home to their own community and be the chief and sons of chiefs or what not. The American black man has to make it or lose it in America; he has no choice. That's why I wrote Cotton Comes to Harlem."

Ossie Davis exploited this in his film version and hammered quintessential black and white behavior down the throat of each audience member. Even simple facial expressions of extras were so poignant they reflected this sense of comedy within Blaxploitation. Even though the Black Power movement faded in the 1970s, "Cotton Comes to Harlem" demonstrated a continual need for social and economic advancement even after the radical 1960s and the civil rights movement. Considered a comedy by some, the movie was mostly intended for its dramatic effect and incorporated just enough cinema-graphic shock-value of violence.

"Cotton Comes to Harlem" further provided enough social commentary to remind us that the African American community, as it exists today, continues to suffer a frustration of living within a society that will not allow it to fully succeed. Who or what is to blame for this painful condition? Taking a deeper look into "Cotton Comes to Harlem" you can find, through Ossie Davis' directing and writing that this film was well before its time, and its themes within its exploitative nature is still relatable in today's society. Blaxploitation movies essentially attempted to present the black experience through sexy, super sleuth and fly Ghetto heroes. While these super-fly new character images were potentially positive in the face of black culture, they would fail to symbolize the aesthetic values of black culture; this failure can be attributed to the social context in which the movies were created, the

domination of stereotypical paradigms created by the movies and the attempt to present the African American experience within a white, cinematic framework.

At first glance, the 'mise-en-scene' appears to be a setting including a cast made up of entirely African Americans; the movie's formula is still pro-white in its nature. Many African Americans were not happy with the portrayal of their race in Hollywood films; this enabled "Cotton Comes to Harlem" to judgmentally analyse a whole culture through prior prejudice. Davis exploits this very nature and uprising of blacks within his use of comedy. For instance, a white police officer refers to the two African American detectives as 'black bastards' near the end of the film, yet the African American actors repeatedly called one another 'nigger' and 'Uncle Tom' throughout the film; both, well more, highly offensive. Davis uses this mise-en-scene to raise awareness of Blaxploitation with one single line.

"Cotton Comes to Harlem" suggests that it isn't plausible for blacks to be accepted in white society, something often seen the other way around in other Blaxploitation films. This film reflects the reality that blacks want to leave the white man's town and return to Africa, something more defined with Harlem Renaissance than Blaxploitation. One can find here that Ossie Davis actually exploited African American culture within the simple color of the actor's skin delivering the line. Ossie Davis was brilliant in the fact that he used codes of production that were not seen before in film. For instance, when he cast the actor to portray a the black preacher, Rev. Deke O'Malley, this character first appeared accusing the 'white man' of oppressing his people—while he planned to rob them blind. Here, we must begin to study

Davis' codes in order to better understand the formula for his production. Study of the codes of television, film, or popular music, for instance, is enhanced by studying the formulas and conventions of production (Kellner 9). If Davis' conventions of production paved the path for black film producers, directors and writers today, why have we not seen African American society grow to what one would suspect, even with a black president?

Ossie Davis transformed the Blaxploitation industry through the use of epic cinematography in " Cotton Comes to Harlem." The most poignant of his cinematography was a cutaway shot early in the film where a pickpocket is hit by a car and thrown in the air to his untimely death. While we do not see him land and the shot cuts back to the Pickpocket on the ground it is a poignant use of depicting violence through cinematography; one that changed Blaxploitation from stale and boring to action adventure. Davis had in mind a contemporary fairy tale, a kind of cops-and-robbers " Purlie Victorious," with stereotypes (Redd Foxx, for example) used in a conscious way to satirize the society that gave them birth Reality and truth, however, keep intruding to break the desired spell (Canby 1). Ossie Davis used a ' realistic' technique to convey relationships within a single shot. This style of cinematography allowed for some very beautiful long takes, characteristically seen through a series of pans within a single continuous shot, like when one of the actors were thrown into the air. He was making an attempt to preserve space and time as much as possible by editing or fragmenting the scenes minimally. For this, composition is very important and the way the actors stand or move in relation to one another is essential.

Thus, the compliment to this is cinematography that utilizes long shots and long takes which was achieved by Davis in “ Cotton Comes to Harlem.”

The film was even more enhanced by the rhetoric within the scriptwriting. Clearly, Ossie Davis was intending the comedy in “ Cotton Comes to Harlem” to be effective and persuasive with clever language that sounded clever, but had no sincerity or meaning. For instance, a hilarious moment when Grave Digger Jones, one of the black cops, enters what seems to be a secret black power movement headquarters, which is actually a Swahili class. A man curses Gravedigger in Swahili. He confidently replies in Swahili. The class member says innocently, “ Where’d you learn them dirty Swahili words?” Gravedigger simply says, “ Ask your Mamma.”

The contrast of the new black man represented in “ Cotton Comes to Harlem” was the sexually aggressive depiction of the white man. Ossie Davis used a young, naïve cop to negate the image that the blacks were the sexually aggressive. In most Blaxploitation films the black man was portrayed as a pimp, sexual predator, drug-dealer, etc. In further examination of Davis’ use of character there is Rev. Duke O’Malley, who was completely committed to a political stance, but in lieu of cleaning up the Ghetto he was promising to get them out--much different from say the Priest in the film Superfly who was a glamorized pimp. Whilst different on the surface, these characters were not very different at all. Again, Ossie Davis defied Blaxploitation by turning the ghetto hero into a monster. His defining ‘ opposites’ within the film went so far as to portray the two black cops a tad more violent, while the black power movement members were calm and docile; this breaks when the black characters fight violence with violence in

the protest scene and the violence is carried toward the white man.

“ Cotton Comes to Harlem” has an excellent use of pathos, where Davis takes the power of a situation within the scriptwriting to cause feelings of sadness, especially sympathy. This can be seen as definitive moment for African Americans, when the black man overcame the generalizations and representations of Blaxploitation films of the past; we can now see why this film was originally not considered Blaxploitation. Can this then be partly attributed to cultural studies? Davis seemed to use pathos to make the audience empathize with the characters; not only this, he gave them a choice on how to perceive his characters through cultural studies. Cultural studies thus promotes a multiculturalist politics and media pedagogy that aims to make people sensitive to how relations of power and domination are " encoded" in cultural texts, such as those of television or film. But it also specifies how people can resist the dominant encoded meanings and produce their own critical and alternative readings.” (Kellner 8).

Most of the women in the Blaxploitation films were reduced down to trivial prostitutes or voluptuous women who flaunted their sexuality. This is the one instance in which the “ Cotton Comes to Harlem” can fully be seen in the same light as the ideology of multi-cultural studies. Ideologies of gender promote sexist representations of women and ideologies of race utilize racist representations of people of color and various minority groups (Kellner 7).

The only thing traditionally seen in Blaxploitation films that Ossie Davis used was the objectification and sexual exploitation of women. However, he threw his own dramatic action by giving the lead female, Iris, a volition that had a dramatic purpose lined to the resolution of the story. Seen originally as a ‘

sexual' being, she eventually gained the power of the plot near the end when tied up, whilst taking her lover's, Rev. Deke O'Malley, life in her hands. In most Blaxploitation films women were there simply to indulge men in various sexual fantasies throughout the film. Ossie Davis focused on the sex appeal and voluptuous physical attributes of Iris, then brought in the other classic female trait of Blaxploitation with having her avenge her heart and nearly kill Rev. Deke O'Malley in a later scene with a broken bottle. Visually stimulating, this is an excellent cinematographic moment, where the audience is visually stimulated through the simple act of a broken bottle rather than dialogue.

Ossie Davis did nail the 'Ghetto glamorization' aspect of Blaxploitation in "Cotton Comes to Harlem" with his use of symbols, metaphor and allegory. He used natural human curiosity to develop the plot through our desire to make patterns and connections by letting the audience work out the story. A classic 'who done it?' aspect was well apparent during the unravelling of the plot. Ossie Davis' plot points did not just function to convey information, it also engaged and entertained by allowing the audience to interpret the story for themselves. Through cinematography and simple moments with no dialogue, the audience could still grasp the story and 'figure it out'. From a directorial standpoint Davis is a story-teller that used symbolism, metaphor and allegory to make the film version of "Cotton Comes to Harlem" more entertaining, and the idea more palatable because his deliberate obscurantism gave the audience the illusion that they have come to the idea expressed by the director independently. From go-go/burlesque to chickens being flung into a street fight as a means of distraction, each viewer can

come to the overall resolve on their own.

The characters featured in the film version of “ Cotton Comes to Harlem” are well-written with strong convictions, moral character and volition. Moral character in film is defined by the relationship between what characters say and do. Moral character is what makes a character a hero, a villain, strong or weak, honest or a liar. Since moral character is defined by what people ‘ do’, a protagonist must have volition in film and scriptwriting. They must be able to ‘ act’ in order to affect their own destiny and the outcome of the story and thus display the true nature of their moral character—something every character does in “ Cotton Comes to Harlem”.

Ossie Davis’ attempt to invoke meaning through identification is evident in several characters, but stood out in Uncle Bud played by comedian legend Red Foxx. Uncle Bud was a well-drawn character who behaved in a psychologically truthful way. Within the world of “ Cotton Comes to Harlem” he provoked the recognition of the audience. Recognition that each member of the audience could identify with because they have experienced something like what Uncle Bud was going through, or would do if they found themselves in a similar situation. Ossie Davis uses this recognition of Uncle Bud to provoke empathy, especially in the end, thus the audience ‘ feels’ for Uncle Bud. This process of recognition leading to empathy leads the audience to ‘ identify’ with Uncle Bud when he takes off with the loot. Thus, deliberately, the events within the story of “ Cotton Comes to Harlem” end up having a direct personal effect and emotional meaning for the audience. This gave “ Cotton Comes to Harlem” meaning.

Therefore, the meaning is a certain result of a well-fashioned plot that makes

connections between events and character and leads the audience to a new understanding; not just to the events of the story being told, but to events in their own lives and other real events. This series of connections in “ Cotton Comes to Harlem” is something we all do all the time; it is part of human rationality and creativity. This means the audience assumes everything they see on screen, and everything a character says is connected to everything else, and is therefore significant to the plot. This is most evident in “ Cotton Comes to Harlem”, seeing that the entire film is about “ Why is there cotton in Harlem?”

“ Cotton Comes to Harlem” reconstituted the way African Americans were portrayed in film. Ossie Davis took the stereotype of the Blaxploitation films which were once used to accurately portray representative characterizations of African Americans, and made it one big, comedic joke. His elements of comedy and role reversal of characters, within his unique use of ‘ mise-en-scene’, paired with his long shot cinematography, and brilliant cutaways made “ Cotton Comes to Harlem” a legendary film. Well before his time, Ossie Davis was a significant, creative contributor to Hollywood and the film industry—especially amongst the African American community.

Through Ghetto glamorization, flashy colors and sassy actresses who defied classic sexual gratification of Blaxploitation, Ossie Davis’ film “ Cotton Comes to Harlem” became a poignant, classic tale of ‘ cops and robbers’. Davis used the simple power of narrative through text and visual effects to evoke emotions and core elements in an audience. All texts are subject to multiple readings depending on the perspectives and subject positions of the reader. Members of distinct genders, classes, races, nations, regions, sexual

preferences, and political ideologies are going to read texts differently, and cultural studies can illuminate why diverse audiences interpret texts in various, sometimes conflicting, ways. It is indeed one of the merits of cultural studies to have focused on audience reception in recent years and this focus provides one of its major contributions, though there are also some limitations and problems with the standard cultural studies approaches to the audience.(Kellner 11, 12).

Therefore, it is my belief that Davis' was purely capitalizing on the comedy of blacks and was simply trying to effect the audience through entertainment-- seeing that we are emotional creatures, humans, digital creatures. Far from static or vague, this film was highly entertaining from an audience perspective. From the moment the ' robbers' appeared in the film, the balance of these characters and their ' Harlem' world was radically upset. Ossie Davis lit a path with his directorial debut, " Cotton Comes to Harlem", defying everything we knew about film, and influencing directors, film makers and scriptwriters today. Through narrative storytelling and provocative jokes, Ossie Davis gave us " Cotton Comes to Harlem" and reconstituted the objectified black man, giving him validity through film in a postmodern age.

Works Cited

Bogle, Donald. " Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks." New York.

Fredrick Unger. 1989.

Print.

Canby, Vincent. " Cotton Comes to Harlem Review." The New York Times.

June 11, 1970. Print.

Kellner, Douglas. " Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism and Media Culture."

Thousand Oaks. Sage

Publications. 1995. Print.

Lawrence, Novotny. " Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s: Blackness and Genre." New York. Taylor

and Francis. 2008. Print.

Nowell-Smith, David. " The Oxford History of World Cinema." New York. Oxford University Press.

1996. Print.

Reid, Mark A. " Redefining Black Film." Berkley and Los Angeles. University of California Press.

1993. Print.

Smith, Valerie. " Representing Blackness." New Jersey. Rutgers University Press. 1997. Print.