

# Popular film – blaxploitation an analysis of shaft essay sample

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Between 1970 and 1980 there was a cultural film explosion, there were over 200 films released by major and independent studios that hyped major black characters and themes. Prior to the Blaxploitation era black actors had been relinquished to playing small parts that usually presented stereotyped images of the black race with roles such as waitresses or shoeshine boys. This however all changed when in 1971 when the first successful black film “Sweetback’s Baadass Song” showed a black man coming out on top over the white establishment. The term blaxploitation both helped and destroyed the genre. While many blaxploitation films were box office successes, they also fueled the public’s perception of blacks as cold-hearted heroes, gangsters, drug dealers, pimps and thugs. Black actors were being exploited by playing these roles (Washington, 2000).

Who’s the black private dick that’s a sex machine to all the chicks? (Shaft!) You’re damn right who is the man that would risk his neck for his brother man? (Shaft!) Can ya dig it? You see this cat Shaft is a bad mother- (Shut your mouth) But I’m talkin’ about Shaft (Then we can dig it) He’s a complicated man but no one understands him but his woman (John Shaft) (Hayes, 2000).

Shaft was originally released in 1971 and became a significant hit, proving instrumental in opening the doors for other films such as “ Superfly” and “ The Mack” (Gleiberman, 2000). Shaft is famous for many things – the boom in blaxploitation films, the invention of badass black attitude and the ultimate rhythm and blues score (Briggs, 2003). With the original Shaft being such a success in the year 2000, John Singleton directed the updated version

of the movie which he co wrote with Shane Slaerno and Richard Price. Shaft, directed by Singleton is not a remake of the original movie, but is in fact an update on the original movie. In a review for Entertainment Weekly Samuel L. Jackson is quoted saying, “ This could be interesting, or it could be a catastrophe”. Both Jackson and Singleton were conscious in not wanting to diss either Richard Roundtree or the original shaft. The simple solution to this dilemma was that Roundtree is back as Shaft, 29 years older, and Samuel L. Jackson was his nephew.

Throughout the original Shaft, the lead character is built up to be a black superman. He refuses to give in to the expectations of a largely racist white society that he be a criminal and that he bow to the will of authority. The original “ Shaft,” directed by Gordon Parks and released in 1971, was a ground-breaking sensation and marked the birth of an entirely new genre: audiences had never seen an African-American hero as tough, as sexual or as street-smart as John Shaft (Washington, 2000).

John Shaft played by Richard Roundtree is a tough private detective in New York City. When returning to his office one day, Shaft learns through his informants that two armed men had been looking for him – runners of a local mobster. Cautiously he advances towards the office, only to discover men there and a fight ensues that sends one of the men though the office window. It turns out that crime lord Bumpy Jonas (Moses Gunn) wanted to talk to Shaft and since his men were unable to bring Shaft in, Bumpy himself has to go see Shaft himself. As it turns out, Bumpy has a job for Shaft.

Bumpy's only daughter has been kidnapped and he asks Shaft to locate and retrieve her. Reluctantly Shaft agrees and no sooner finds himself right in the middle of a street war. It turned out that not only did Bumpy hire him to recover his daughter, he also made Shaft the target of the Mafia, who took Bumpy's daughter as a token in a conflict between the two factions. Fuming, Shaft confronts Bumpy but since he gave his word to rescue the girl, he can't turn back. Shaft teams up with a group of underground rebels called the Black Panthers and with their help decides to make sure that the Italian mobsters understand that there is no room for them or their games in his city (Henkel, 2000).

Blaxploitation movies were built upon a shared recognition of the need to shake up the status quo — the collateral rage of the civil rights movement was brought to the big screen. These movies didn't limit themselves to making style statements, or tracking ingenious petty crimes and big rip-offs. Similar to other movies in the same genre, the women portrayed in the movie were not well realized, or treated well. In one particular scene Shaft harshly tries to dismiss his one-night stand, the woman in question then criticizes him for his callousness (Washington, 2000). While now days the original " Shaft" wouldn't hold up as an action film, it is because most people are too young to be aware of the elation that charged movie houses of the 70's as cheering black audiences saw a dark-skinned hero — iconic and masculine in his up-to-the-minute proto-fade haircut and collection of leathers — in total control of his destiny. Richard Roundtree's on-screen

relish, which was itself a kind of dynamism, connected to an audience hunger (Washington, 2000).

Perhaps even more successful than the original ' Shaft' movie was the accompanying soundtrack. The upbeat and funky blues score reached number one on the music charts while also securing Isaac Hayes a Grammy and Oscar for his efforts. The musical score managed to capture the spirit of John Shaft and his New York City turf, with its slick and soulful sounds. Hayes is credited with popularizing rap, which he employed in the " Theme From Shaft". Behind Shaft's opening credits, Hayes belts out a funky bass-line with a lively high-hat that conveys the essence of John Shaft better than any of the script's characterization could have possibly done. As the theme breaks down into strings and horns, Hayes raps, " They say this cat Shaft is a bad mother..." " Shut your mouth!" the backup singers protest. Hayes explains, " But I'm talkin' about Shaft." " We can dig it." (Washington, 2000)

The theme from shaft is able to describe Shaft both lyrically and musically. As the audience first gets introduced to Shaft they see him emerging from the subway at Broadway and 42nd street in his trademark black leather trench coat and beige cashmere turtleneck. Shaft then proceeds to stride across Manhattan like a man who owns the place, never being so uncool as to actually pay attention to traffic, they adapt to him. While this scenario is unfolding the rap is building him up as the coolest and toughest man in New York, while the music is setting the mood for the world, and the movie that he inhabits. The introduction to the updated shaft holds no such significance (Briggs, 2003).

When considering who was to fill the role for the updated version of Shaft, director John Singleton had no hesitation in hiring Samuel L. Jackson. Singleton is quoted saying, “ Sam Jackson was absolutely the pinnacle of those guys. Shaft is a cool, contemporary presence — a man who moves easily among many different worlds. He’s as much at home downtown as uptown. That’s the way the character was originally, and that’s what Sam brings to it now.” Samuel L. Jackson steps into the role as if he was born to play it, decked out in his shades and chrome dome just like Isaac Hayes on the cover of his album Black Moses. The casting of the updated movie was done rather well. Vanessa Williams starred as police detective Carmen Vasquez, a tough, action-filled role that was a departure from most of the characters she has portrayed in the past.

Both Jeffrey Wright and British-born Christian Bale had new accents to learn which were both pulled off remarkably well. Australian actress Toni Collette played the emotionally unstable witness to the murder in the movie. Making a cameo appearance in “ Shaft” is director Gordon Parks, who guided the creation of the original “ Shaft” and who is revered by generations of filmmakers. Parks’ appearance (he can be seen seated at a table in a sequence at Harlem’s Lenox Lounge) is, in fact, an echo of the cameo he made in the original “ Shaft” 30 years ago (Anonymous, 2000).

As a movie, the updated Shaft is cooler than the original. There were no substandard CGI effects just cars, guns, money, clothes and a man battling evil, a recipe for a typical Hollywood action movie. In the updated version, Shaft is an ace cop who throws away his badge and makes his own rules

(Sheffield, 2000). The basic narrative is a crime has been committed in New York. A young black man has been found outside a club murdered. Rebellious cop John Shaft is called in to investigate. Shaft is the nephew of the legendary cop John Shaft, and he lives up to his uncle's reputation every day. Anyway, the prime suspect in this killing is Walter Wade (Christian), son of a rich real estate tycoon. The only witness to the crime is thought to be the bartender of the club, Diana (Toni Collette), but she won't talk to Shaft. Wade is arrested and immediately posts bail. In a fit of fury, he quits the NYPD in rather dramatic form and goes after Wade on his own. The key here is Diana, and she's fearfully gone underground.

Wade, on the other hand, has better ideas. He teams up with a drug dealer named Peoples (Jeffery Wright) who hates Shaft almost as much as Wade does. Wade contracts Peoples to hunt Diana down and kill her before she can talk to Shaft. He gets wind of the plan, and tries to track the girl down before Peoples can make her a distant memory. While the plot isn't highly original, Singleton didn't need the intricate plotting. The essence of Shaft is simple, he is a no-nonsense man with one way of operating, he kicks butt and if you get in his way, you go down. He is a firm believer in justice on its rawest terms. Singleton strayed from the original movie narrative with his tangled web story lines, unlike Parks who delivered a straight up storyline with no twists or bends (Daniel, 2000).

While the opening sequence to the updated Shaft does not even come close to rivaling the original, the characterization of Shaft in the movie does not hold true to that of the original. While Jackson is always in charge and full of

attitude to burn, he seems to lack the ‘sex machine’ attitude, which was abundant in the original. “Who’s that private dick that’s a sex machine for all the chicks?” Not this Shaft. While the new Shaft talks the talk with his occasional one line of “It’s my duty to please that booty”, he never plays or takes that step further. This is one place where this film shows its cynical heart (Travers, 2000).

Mr. Parks’s “Shaft” was an inside look at the inner city, made with its African-American target audience always in mind. This version however feels straight out of Hollywood, carefully calibrated for crossover appeal. While the blaxploitation films of the 70’s may have been the cinematic equivalent of fast food, they at their best offered something unavailable from Hollywood haute cuisine: an adrenalized tingle – the raw, salty rush of outlaw anarchy and racial fury served up without any false wrapping. These movies were street corner fantasies as uncut in their grade B potency as they were cheap in execution (Glieberman, 2000). While the new and updated Shaft was set for the new ‘bling-bling’ world, it failed to have the same impact that the original had on the audiences. Although 30 years apart, each movie has catered for what they perceived their audiences wanted, and delivered. In an overall comparison the updated Shaft just seems to be lacking an essence that was so abundant in the original, I guess there is no replacing the original in this case.