



Blaxploitation Cinema

The *blaxploitation* film genre emerged in the early 1970s, when Hollywood studios began releasing movies that depicted a particularly gritty version of black urban life. These films featured almost entirely black casts and were often set in crime-ridden inner-city ghettos. Although the genre emerged on the heels of the Civil Rights movement, blaxploitation films were rarely moral parables or political manifestos: instead, protagonists in these films included private detectives (*Shaft*, 1971), drug dealers (*Superfly*, 1972), and violent, tough-talking women in pursuit of revenge (*Coffy*, 1973; *Foxy Brown*, 1974). Musically, many of these films featured Funk soundtracks by prominent black musicians, including Isaac Hayes (*Shaft*), James Brown (*Black Caesar*, 1973), and Curtis Mayfield (*Superfly*). The films offered audiences entertainment and thrills as they played out fantasies of empowerment and justice in a world that existed outside of white society’s laws. The box office success of movies like *Shaft* and *Superfly* was definitive in the fight for more black artists in the film industry.

While the name of the genre is rooted in the word “exploitation,” in many ways the opposite was true. Blaxploitation signaled the rise of a new Black Cinema that employed comparatively higher numbers of black performers, directors, music composers, and other professionals than had ever worked in the industry. From the early days of Hollywood, studios had been relatively closed off to African Americans. Black characters, when they appeared, were generally written as racist stereotypes, especially before the Civil Rights movement. Two prominent examples include Hattie McDaniel’s Oscar-winning portrayal of “Mammy,” the maid in *Gone With the Wind* (1939), and James Baskett as “Uncle Remus,” the back porch narrator and singer of “Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah” in Disney’s *Song of the South* (1946) -- a role that earned him an honorary Oscar. Until 1963, McDaniel and Baskett were the only two African Americans to have received Academy Awards for work onscreen or behind the camera.

The political struggles of the 1960s opened up a sliver of serious roles for actors of color in Hollywood, but even these roles tended to be punctuation in an otherwise white narrative, such as Sidney Poitier’s Oscar-winning lead role in *Lilies of the Field* (1963) or his later appearance in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967), a drama about interracial marriage. Comparatively, blaxploitation films of the 1970s told black narratives in black vernacular with African-American tastes in fashion and music front and center: the cultural reference points of black America appeared onscreen like never before.

Academy Award-Winning Performers by Ethnicity, 1929-1980

