

## Blaxploitation Horror Films: Generic Reappropriation or Reinscription?

by Harry M. Benshoff

*The intersection of racial identity and narrative structure in blaxploitation horror films produced a potential critique of both social and generic racism, as well as a significant variation in how the genre classically figures normality and monstrosity.*

This essay explores how the concept of African American agency historically negotiated the generic structure of the horror film during the years of the blaxploitation film craze (roughly 1969–76). This is an important topic, since the American horror film often hinges on filmically constructed fears of the Other—an Otherness both drawn from and constitutive of any given era's cultural history. As many theorists have pointed out, the generic pattern of the classical American horror film oscillates between the "normal," mostly represented by the white, middle-class heterosexuality of the films' heroes and heroines, and the "monstrous," frequently colored by racial, sexual, class, or other ideological markers.<sup>1</sup> Since most of the horror films produced in America have been created by white filmmakers, it should not be surprising that the vast majority of those films use race as a marker of monstrosity in ways generically consistent with the larger social body's assumptions about white superiority.<sup>2</sup>

By way of contrast, I explore how the discourse of race plays out in blaxploitation horror films. How are the generic tenets of "normality" and "difference" refigured (if they are) when viewed through the lens of a marginalized racial collective? In what ways might these films have addressed the specific fantasy needs of the black social imaginary? Ultimately, for some viewers, blaxploitation horror films mounted a challenge to the Other-phobic assumptions of the genre's more common reception. However, while appearing to critique white racism in America, most of these films were unable to withstand the genre's more regular demonization of gender and sexuality, which are arguably more deeply embedded as monstrous within both the horror film and the culture at large.

The issue of African American agency is complicated by the fact that many of the films discussed below had white directors, editors, producers, and crews. Given the "leaky" or incomplete nature of traditional auteur (and genre) theory in light of poststructuralist reformulations and cultural studies, a provisional definition of the blaxploitation horror film should be proffered: a horror film made in the early 1970s that had *some* degree of African American input, not necessarily through the director but perhaps through a screenwriter, producer, and/or even an actor.

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The label "blaxploitation horror films" thus signifies a historically specific subgenre that potentially explores (rather than simply exploits) race and race consciousness as core structuring principles. However, as the meaning of any text is also shaped by its readers, I also include in my definition the historical African American audiences to whom these films were marketed.<sup>3</sup>

This project thus underscores not only the changing social understanding of the American horror film but also the changing social meanings of "African Americanness." As Ed Guerrero notes:

The social and political meanings of "race," of course, are not fixed but are matters of ongoing construction and contestation; whether in volatile debate or subtle transactions, the negotiation of racial images, boundaries, and hierarchies has been part of our national life from its very beginnings. The turbulent power of race is evinced by the varieties of ways in which the images and historical experiences of African Americans and other people of color are symbolically figured in commercial cinema.<sup>4</sup>

Those symbolic figurations in turn contribute to the ongoing construction of racial meaning and identity within specific social and historical contexts. I mean to situate my comments about race and genre away from the essentialist position that conceives "of ethnicity and cultural identity as a predetermined, immutable condition beyond circumstances and rational control" and toward the position that views ethnicity and race as culturally and socially constructed, what Werner Sollors has called a model of identity by "consent" rather than "descent."<sup>5</sup> Identity "is a process located in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his [or her] communal culture," a process that depends on the subject's interaction with cultural artifacts both high and low, sacred and profane, from the "high" art of literary masterpieces to the "low" art of horror films.<sup>6</sup>

Previous scholarly work on the horror film has examined how the genre creates a potential space of problematic identification for people who might be gay, lesbian, or otherwise queer.<sup>7</sup> That research directly informs this article, especially when trying to explain the often-quoted anecdotal observation that "the black audience ha[s] always been a substantial part of the horror [movie] crowd."<sup>8</sup> I suggest that queers (broadly defined as anyone who rejects the essential superiority of a straight white male identity) are drawn to the genre because of its many intriguing "not normal" representations. This would suggest that the horror film functions hegemonically, in effect enabling socially oppressed people to contribute to their own oppression by consenting to the manufacture of their own identities as monstrous Others. Yet the actual processes of spectatorship are multiple and fluid, oscillating between masochistic and sadistic poles, and highly dependent on the cultural and historical positioning of readers. Thus, identifying with monsters out to topple dominant social institutions (that oppress both movie monsters and real-life minorities) can be a pleasurable and a potentially empowering act for many filmgoers. Such was the case for African American cultural critic Darius James, author of *That's Blaxploitation!*, who notes that he was known throughout his teenage years as "the Wolfman of Winchester Avenue," since he spent a great deal of time reading monster movie magazines, making himself up to look like a monster,

and dreaming of “join[ing] the ranks of horror screen legends Boris Karloff, Peter Lorre and Vincent Price.”<sup>9</sup> Recently, James noted how these figures of his adolescence functioned as points of identification and political awakening:

Until the revolution came, I was forced to wait in the basement of my father’s house on a second-hand Castro Convertible sofa under posters of Angela Davis and H. Rap Brown with a square of paper acid dissolving on my tongue. In the basement’s cathode-tube-lit darkness, I’d watch Universal’s old monster movies on a flea-market Motorola hallucinating the *Famous Monsters of Filmland* terrorizing whyte suburboid populations with Huey Newton’s helium squeak voice.<sup>10</sup>

**The Blaxploitation Context.** Blaxploitation filmmaking contributed to the ongoing social construction of race during an especially labile era of the nation’s civil rights struggles.<sup>11</sup> During these years, the ideologies of black nationalism, black pride, and black macho became dominant social expressions of racial identity for many African American men and women. In general, blaxploitation films depicted a stronger, more militant image of African Americans who triumphed over (frequently racist) white antagonists. As one black critic succinctly put it, “Black heroes were winning and community identification was intense.”<sup>12</sup> The effect of this change on the construction of cinematic narrative was to flip the terms of the hierarchical white-black opposition rather than necessarily oppose it. The reaction was a profoundly cathartic one for many black filmgoers at the time, but this reformulation is also necessarily more nuanced depending on the generic structures being reworked. For example, most black film critics of the era saw this racial rearticulation as a positive development in genres such as the western or the police thriller. In the case of gangster films and horror films, however, in which the protagonists were more complicated antiheroes, the middle-class black press often became quite hostile, arguing that the films were potentially damaging to the black psyche and/or to the struggle for equal rights.<sup>13</sup>

Most blaxploitation films tended to be easily identifiable as genre films, and, as such, most filmgoers and critics alike usually understood them to be “escapist entertainment” rather than serious sociopolitical tracts about race in America. Yet this opposition is readily deconstructed as a false binary that obfuscates or denies the powerful ideological effects of mass culture. George Lipsitz has argued that blaxploitation genre films should be approached as expressions of “genre anxiety” and understood dialectically. According to Lipsitz, this anxiety is “created by the conflict between the conservative continuity reinforced by the persistence of generic forms and the ceaseless pattern of social change that makes almost all generic representations seem inadequate and obsolete. . . . In many cases, foregrounding race did more than desegregate previously all-white genres. Rather, the prominence of race called the generic form itself into question.”<sup>14</sup>

Thomas Cripps has noted similar tensions between Hollywood’s generic forms and African American spectatorship in 1930s “race movies”: “The great myths did not fit as cleanly. For [blacks] as audiences to root for the cavalry against the Indians, Tarzan against the tribes, [or] Douglas Fairbanks over the vizier was an anomaly.”<sup>15</sup> By the time of the blaxploitation era, however, some black filmmakers were

in positions of industrial power and/or authorial sophistication that enabled them to address those tensions between Hollywood form and black audiences. Both African American and white filmmakers began to reappropriate generic forms for more overtly political goals, specifically, to critique the white power structure. Many blaxploitation films contain much harsher critiques of American racism than do the correspondingly "serious" black films of the era, such as *Sounder* (1972) or *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972).<sup>16</sup> In fact, some in the white media establishment acknowledged blaxploitation film's political charge, as evidenced by a 1974 *Variety* article that asserted that blaxploitation films were not performing well at European box offices because "Europeans are simply more prejudiced than American audiences and are less willing to accept the black-dominated features, many of which are both anti-capitalistic and anti-white in implication."<sup>17</sup>

The black press of the era also began to see important political meanings in allegedly meaningless genre films. For instance, the black western *Buck and the Preacher* (Sidney Poitier, 1972) was noted for making "a social statement, having to do with Blacks' relationship with Indians in the old West."<sup>18</sup> Within the horror genre, lingering racist tropes, such as the black ape-man myth, were now readily identified and exposed. In 1976, for example, the following short piece ran in *Jet* magazine, attesting both to Hollywood's institutionalized racism and the black press's commitment to exposing it: "Black actors in Hollywood are upset because the producers of the forthcoming movie *King Kong* are looking for an 'ape-like' black person to play the title role. According to black actors who tried out for the role offered by [Dino] De Laurentiis Studios, they were asked to jump around and hop, bent over like a gorilla. In the wake of the odd audition, gossip among black actors resulted in strongly negative reactions."<sup>19</sup> Paradoxically, only a few years earlier, black actors and stuntmen had chastised Hollywood for *not* casting them as ape-men in *Planet of the Apes* (1968).<sup>20</sup> These two incidents underscore the difficulty of constructing and casting monsters in a politically sensitive era, as well as the wide variety of responses in black communities to the question of what constitutes a "positive" media image, an aspect of blaxploitation film reception that was widely and passionately debated.

Blaxploitation horror films were rarely referenced within those debates, possibly because black youth were thought to be less likely to emulate a supernatural creature than to emulate a drug dealer (as was argued about the potential social effects of *Superfly* [1972]). Nonetheless, *Blacula* (1972), the first and most commercially successful of these films, was singled out for condemnation by the media watchdog group, the Committee against Blaxploitation (CAB). Junius Griffin, of the Hollywood office of the NAACP, became embroiled in a battle of words when he suggested that "if black actors can play demeaning roles in *Blacula*," then he could see no reason why (white actor) Anthony Quinn should not play the proposed role of Haitian revolutionary Henry Christophe instead of *Blacula* star William Marshall.<sup>21</sup> Other black critics grew tired of blaxploitation-bashing and cited *Blacula* as being less exploitative than the usual fare.<sup>22</sup> Still other black reviewers picked up on the film's more overtly political significance: "I have . . . chosen to look upon the entire film as an effort by those responsible to show satirically the



Figure 1. *Blacula* (AIP, 1972) was a commercially successful blaxploitation film starring William Marshall. Courtesy American International Pictures.

black man's plight as a victim of white vampirism. . . . Those who enjoy seeing the establishment take a whipping will be interested in the number of L.A. Police done in by this midnite creeper."<sup>23</sup>

White media critics were also confused over the meaning of the film. Some opined that *Blacula* was "remarkably free of the effects of the 'frought-with-significance' syndrome."<sup>24</sup> Still others noted that the film was "something more than just

an exploitation of the black and the horror box-office market. . . . The film is both a tender love story and a statement about society's outcasts."<sup>25</sup> White-dominated fan organizations lauded the film. The Count Dracula Society called it "the most horrifying film of the decade," and the Academy of Horror Films and Science Fiction Films named it the "Best Horror Film of 1972."

Nonetheless, even as middle-class black audiences and the champions of "respectable" cinema might have been made uneasy by the exploitative and/or generic nature of *Blacula*, extratextual uses of the film became important to the struggle for racial advancement. For example, in both Los Angeles and San Francisco, gala premieres of *Blacula* were held in the black community. The *Los Angeles Sentinel*, a weekly independent black newspaper, ran a two-page photo spread on the film's premiere, which was hosted by the Regalettes Social and Charity Club. The article noted that it was the "first ever Hollywood premiere hosted by a black organization";<sup>26</sup> however, the paper's entertainment critics, Bill Lane and Gertrude Gipson, remained silent on the quality of the film itself, possibly because of the confusion over whether or not *Blacula* represented a "positive" depiction of African Americans and their concerns. *Ebony* noted that "although well attended, horror flick [*Blacula*] met with mixed reaction because of [its] bizarre nature."<sup>27</sup>

*Blacula* was so successful at the box office that American International Pictures (AIP) announced its intentions to remake all the classical Hollywood horror films with black casts.<sup>28</sup> AIP ended up producing and/or releasing *The Thing with Two Heads* (1972), a sequel to *Blacula* entitled *Scream Blacula Scream* (1973), (*The Zombies of*) *Sugar Hill* (1974), *Abby* (1974), and *J.D.'s Revenge* (1976). Smaller independent companies released *Blackenstein* (Exclusive International, 1973) and *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde*, aka *The Watts Monster* (Dimension Films, 1975/1979), while Twentieth Century-Fox distributed *House on Skull Mountain* (1974). Universal announced plans for a film entitled *The Werewolf of Watts*, which was never made. Also announced but never made were *The Devil's Door* (with William Marshall), *Blackenstein II*, and *Fall of the House of Blackenstein*. While the degree of black involvement varied from film to film (*House on Skull Mountain* was produced by blacks),<sup>29</sup> only *Blacula* and *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* were directed by an African American, William Crain, who since that time has worked more extensively in television (*The Rookies*, *Mod Squad*, *Starsky and Hutch*) than in film.

Like most blaxploitation films, these horror films were notable for their popularization of urban black culture and the showcasing of African American talent. Most have at least one nightclub scene wherein black musical artists perform, and Motown Records released soundtrack albums for several of the more popular AIP films. *Sugar Hill* opens with a cabaret act scored with The Originals's "Supernatural Voodoo Woman," crystallizing the film's revenge narrative ("Do her wrong and you won't see the light"). Michael Jackson recorded a tender ballad as the theme song to *Ben* (1972), the horror-thriller sequel to *Willard* (1971), about a boy and his people-eating rat, and the artist soon to be known as Prince wrote the music for *J. D.'s Revenge*.

The films are also steeped in African American culture of the early 1970s; references to the Black Panthers, Afrocentric style, soul food, white racism (both insti-

tutionalized and personal), and urban ghetto life abundant and in many cases are critically commented upon. (From *Blacula*: "Funny how so many sloppy police jobs involve black victims.") *Blackenstein* makes it explicit that its black Vietnam veteran lost his limbs in a white war; he is still preyed upon by white mad science when he is turned into a monster. And many of the films draw heavily on voodoo as a "more authentic" expression of the African American supernatural, especially after *Jet* magazine wondered in print "why there should be a film based on the Dracula legend when there is voodoo in the black experience."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, voodoo subsequently figured in the *Blacula* sequel and in the "old dark house" thriller *The House on Skull Mountain*, as well as in *Sugar Hill*, much as it did in the blaxploitation-influenced James Bond film *Live and Let Die* (1972). Although these developments might seem racist in films made solely by whites (i.e., using African or African American culture as the signifier of exoticized horror), within these films they usually represent a form of black cultural empowerment over a rational white discourse.

**Monstrous Metaphors.** Tying into the Afrocentric culture of late 1960s/early 1970s, many blaxploitation horror films reappropriated the mainstream cinema's monstrous figures for black goals, turning vampires, Frankenstein monsters, and transformation monsters into agents of black pride and black power. "Normality," represented by black heterosexual couples and black (and white) authority figures, also appears in these films, but unlike most Hollywood horror films of previous eras, audience sympathy is often redirected away from those figures and toward the figure of the monster, a specifically black *avenger* who justifiably fights against the dominant order—which is often explicitly coded as racist. Ad campaigns for the films assured patrons they would see *Blacula* set a "death trap for *revenge*" and partake of an "orgy of *vengeance*." Some of the films, such as *Sugar Hill*, are predicated solely upon this formula. After a racist white Mafia gang murders her lover, *Sugar Hill* raises zombies from the dead to avenge herself. She does so triumphantly, and the film ends with the white gangsters dead and *Sugar's* zombies returning to the underworld. Unlike the classical Hollywood horror film narrative, there is no need to punish or destroy the monsters. In fact, the reverse is true: the monsters kill the racist agents of "normality," and the audience is expected to cheer these developments. As *BoxOffice* noted at the time, director "Maslansky realizes that urban audiences will be rooting for *Sugar*."<sup>31</sup>

Central to these films' reappropriation of the monster as an empowering black figure is the softening, romanticizing, and even valorizing of the monster. In *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde*, Bernie Casey plays Dr. Henry *Pride*, a prize-winning medical researcher assisted by Dr. Billie *Worth* (Rosalind Cash); both doctors serve the black community by working at the free clinic and the local arts center. *Blacula* is actually an African prince named Mamuwalde, much more of a lover than a fighter, who tenderly tries to find his reincarnated princess. In the sequel, *Scream Blacula Scream*, Prince Mamuwalde even tries to cure his vampiric ways. The cure fails, and the film ends with an extremely high-angle freeze frame of the tortured creature, while the theme song *Torment* is heard over the credits—"I lived in endless empty space, so alone, so empty . . . Hoping that in you there was a power . . . to



Figure 2. The zombies in *Sugar Hill* (1974) are explicitly marked as former slaves. Courtesy American International Pictures.

end this search for my soul / A power that would give me freedom, freedom, freedom." Frozen in time by the freeze frame and disempowered by the high-angle shot, the vampiric Mamuwalde is finally trapped as more tragic than evil, more a doomed freedom fighter than a monster.

In another possible attempt to dampen the monster's evilness, Blacula's first attack in the first film is directed at an interracial gay couple who have inadvertently brought his coffin to America to sell in their antique store. Although the film was ahead of its time in representing an interracial gay relationship (and tying it to black revolutionary power), it possibly situates the couple as Blacula's first victims to make Blacula seem *less* of a monster, because the gay couple's deaths are somehow deserved (or at least comedic). One recent account of the film reads it that way, claiming that Blacula is "appalled by contemporary customs and morals, putting the bite on drug dealers and homosexual antique dealers to help clean things up."<sup>32</sup> (The reviewer's homophobia aside, there are no drug dealers in the film or any indications that Blacula is appalled by today's "morals.")

In blaxploitation horror films, the monster often becomes an allegory for the historical experience of African Americans. *Blacula's* vampirism is an explicit metaphor for slavery: bitten by the racist Count Dracula centuries ago ("I shall place a curse of suffering on you that will doom you to a living hell"), the curse of



vampirism becomes the lingering legacy of racism. Indeed, Blacula explicitly states that he was "enslaved" by the curse of vampirism. What he finds so distasteful about his state is that he must now enslave others, biting them and turning them into his minions. Even more forthrightly drawing on that history, in *Scream Blacula Scream*, the count is harassed by two pimps; before breaking their skulls he tells them, "You've made a slave out of your sister and you're still slaves imitating your slave masters!" And in *Sugar Hill*, the heroine's "zombie hit men" are explicitly marked as former slaves through both dialogue and the prominent placement of their rusting shackles within the *mise-en-scène*. At least one critic argued that the film's "vengeance is given a certain historical-political dimension. [Gangster] Morgan's gang, represented throughout as the arm of white exploitation and racism, is obliterated by the corpses of black slaves in a dream of apocalypse out of Nat Turner."<sup>33</sup>

Many of the films also play out interesting variations on W.E.B. DuBois's concept of "twoness" in the African American psyche. As J. Ronald Green put it, African Americans "face the possibility of two social identities at the same time, whose relations to each other are strained, but which each black American must somehow resolve individually for herself or himself. The models for the two conflicting identities are to be found firstly in the dominant white culture that cannot be ignored, and secondly, in the ethnic black culture of their Afrocentric group."<sup>34</sup> In *Blacula* and *Scream Blacula Scream*, the central figure must mediate his African heritage with his Westernized vampirism and new name given to him by Dracula ("I curse you with my name—you shall be Blacula!"). This situation parallels the historical deculturization process of the slave industry, which denied African prisoners their families, religions, and even names. At the end of *Scream Blacula Scream*, when Prince Mamuwalde realizes that the attempt to cure his European vampirism through African voodoo has failed, he pointedly cries out, "The name is Blacula!" Other films more playfully acknowledge this duality, as when Sugar and her zombie helper, Baron Samedi, deliberately assume "Uncle Tom" demeanors to lure their victims to their deaths.

*Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* shows a great deal of promise in articulating these concerns, although its exploration of "twoness" dwindles away as the film focuses on the protagonist's personal psychology issues. Medical researcher Dr. Pride invents a serum that will regenerate damaged liver tissue, but its side effects turn his subjects into white maniacs. This good-black, bad-white dichotomy is complicated because the film has already symbolically figured Dr. Pride as a "white" Negro (conveyed through explicit dialogue and brilliant white sets and costumes). In this way, the film seems to argue against an assimilationist project, even as it still wants to take pride in the doctor's accomplishments. *J. D.'s Revenge* also suggests a man caught between two different constructions of African American maleness when Ike, a modern-day black law student, finds himself possessed by the spirit of J. D. Walker, a jive-talking gangster from 1942. Ike conks his hair, wears zoot suits, and treats his girlfriend as a pimp might treat his whore. The film points out that J. D.'s style and masculine brutality are still a lingering problem in 1970s black macho culture.

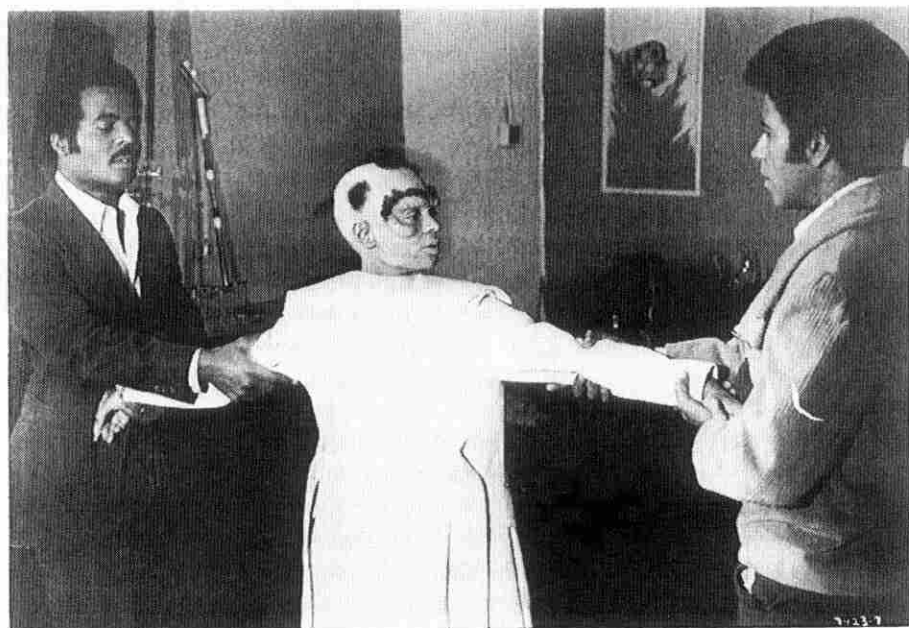


Figure 3. Abby Williams (Carol Speed) is a woman possessed by a sexual demon in *Abby* (AIP, 1974). Courtesy American International Pictures.

**Gender and Sexuality.** *J. D.'s Revenge* is a rare blaxploitation film in that it calls into question the black macho ethic. Most of the other blaxploitation horror films, like blaxploitation films in general, tend to uphold male-dominated (hetero)sexuality and participation in the genre's usual demonization of women and nonpatriarchal sexualities. For example, *Abby* (1974), an obvious gloss on *The Exorcist* (1973), makes a sexualized woman into a monster.<sup>35</sup> Abby starts out as a sweet-natured preacher's wife who sings in the choir, runs the youth program, and is a marriage counselor, but she becomes possessed by the spirit of Eshu, the African trickster god of sexuality. Soon Abby is masturbating in the shower, coming on to her clients, and tricking at local nightclubs. Following the reactionary narrative logic of this type of film, Abby's father-in-law, a theologian, calls upon both African and Western gods and drives the demon from her body, restoring her to her proper role as wife and daughter. Somewhat ironically, this film allowed its script to undergo revisions suggested by African American input (a move AIP made to appease critics of its earlier blaxploitation films). *BoxOffice* noted before the film was released that it "will be avoiding some of the clichés about black people and will be more in line with the present thinking of CORE and other groups about how they should be portrayed on screen."<sup>36</sup> Perhaps these revisions were responsible for the positive depiction of black Christian religiosity, but they were at the expense of demonizing women, sexuality, and the Yoruba god Eshu, who herein becomes steeped in a Western, sex-negative Christian ideology.<sup>37</sup> Although this

development may have pleased some middle-class black Christians, the reviewer at the adult-entertainment magazine *Players* opined that *Abby* "represents black exploitation at its worst."<sup>38</sup>

Nonetheless, *Abby* has a black woman protagonist, a trope of later blaxploitation films such as *Coffy* (1973), *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), and *Friday Foster* (1975). Both black and white critics had decried the overwhelming sexism in earlier blaxploitation films,<sup>39</sup> and filmmakers had responded by inserting female protagonists into the formerly male "avenger" role, another flipping of binary concepts that had the potential to reveal an inherent hierarchy. For example, the press judged Blacula's monstrous appetites to be "noble, even tragic,"<sup>40</sup> whereas *Abby's* appetites were figured as grotesque and in need of eradication. *Sugar Hill* comes closer to some kind of gender equality, since Sugar is smart, strong, and independent and has her own career. Yet her mission for revenge is predicated solely on the loss of her man, and, as is typical of these films, Sugar is sexually objectified throughout. Even her career as a fashion photographer conveniently allows the filmmakers to include a bikini photo shoot.

The black women's fashion magazine *Essence*, in which one might expect to find more information about woman-centered black films (especially since some of their lead actresses were ex-fashion models), employed a male film critic during these years. He occasionally cited the sexism of the more popular blaxploitation films but rarely mentioned the developing "blaxploitation superwoman."<sup>41</sup> This is not surprising given the scapegoating of strong women within the era's black macho culture and *Essence's* editorial goal of helping black women assimilate into traditional (i.e., passive and cosmeticized) models of Western femininity. The magazine's first film article by a woman critiqued the sexism of blaxploitation films,<sup>42</sup> but it was the readers who more regularly proffered negative critiques: "We pay to see our morals degraded, our culture laughed at and the perpetuation of the myth that some of us would rather lie on our backs than use our minds. The majority of the money-making 'black' movies depict the black woman as superwoman, a hustler's ole lady or a prostitute."<sup>43</sup>

As Michele Wallace has demonstrated in her essays on black macho, there was little chance that the black superwoman would empower most black women of the early 1970s.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, both conservative Christian pundits and radical black militants often cited strong black women (and effeminate or gay black men) as something that was "wrong" with black culture. An attack on black men's fashions from this era ("an appearance often inspired by homosexual designers") decried "the drugging and faggotizing of black men in recent years [which was] robbing black people of the spirit and man-force essential to the reversal of the European destruction machine."<sup>45</sup> Like the black macho ethic in general, most blaxploitation horror films attempted to advance the race by promoting the strong black male avenger; even if monstrous, he was romanticized and celebrated. Female monsters were more regularly deemed truly monstrous because of their wanton sexuality (*Abby*) or were contained within patriarchal parameters through both plot and cinematographic objectification (*Sugar Hill*).

Many critics of these films may have condemned the blaxploitation horror film simply because of its generic imperatives—African American monsters, no



Figures 4 and 5. The “monstrous” Sugar (Marki Bey) is hypersexual and wears an Afro, whereas the “normal” Sugar is demure and has straightened hair. Courtesy American International Pictures.

matter how likable, justified, heroic, or interesting, were still monsters, and, in most cases, the films used signs of African and African American culture to signify horror. One encounters the same problem in attempting to reappropriate the genre as “progressive” for any specific cultural group because the very formula of the genre demonizes difference, be it based on gender, sexuality, or race. In *Sugar Hill*, for example, Sugar wears a full black Afro hairdo when murdering her enemies but lightened and straightened hair in her “normal” life. Sugar’s Afrocentrism, like her use of voodoo, is a sign of her power but also of her monstrosity and violence. In the same film, pop-eyed black zombies, shot with a subjective camera, suture the spectator into the victim’s position and ask him/her to be afraid of blackness à la classical Hollywood horror films. Finally, stock Hollywood musical tropes, such as “primitive jungle drums,” are used to invoke fear—a practice that has not changed very much over the years.

The lingering racist discourse of Negro bestiality is also evident in these films’ makeup codes. Black monsters tend to be more animalistic than white monsters: when Blacula gets his blood lust up, for example, he becomes almost lupine, with a hairy face and brow, a trope usually not used for more debonair white vampires. The possessed woman in *Abby* also has facial hair and a deep voice (drawing on gender-blending queer fears as well as bestial/racial ones), and in *Blackenstein* the monster has hairy hands, while his Afro-natural hair is molded into a square, box-

like head reminiscent of Boris Karloff's Frankenstein monster. Blaxploitation horror films may have attempted to reappropriate the genre for racial advancement, but the genre's deeply embedded structure still worked to reinscribe racist tropes.

**The Black Art Horror Film.** One very different black-authored horror film produced during this era was *Ganja and Hess* (1973). An exploration of the multiple connections among various states of Otherness (race, gender, sexuality, class, and religion), this black vampire film, based on a script entitled "The Vampires of Harlem," was financed by the black and white production team Kelly-Jordan after the commercial success of *Blacula*, but writer/director/actor Bill Gunn was not interested in producing a formulaic Hollywood-style horror film.<sup>46</sup> Gunn's film makes use of a deliberate art-house style and self-conscious thematic and narrative ambiguity; the filmic text that results is far more "open" in structure and potential meaning than the typically linear blaxploitation horror film. Manthia Diawara has argued that the film's elliptical style is important to the creation of a black film aesthetic "concerned with the specificity of identity, the empowerment of black people through *mise-en-scène*, and the rewriting of American history. Their narratives contain rhythmic and repetitious shots, going back and forth between the past and present. Their themes involve black folklore, religion, and the oral tradition which link black Americans to the African Diaspora. The narrative style is symbolic."<sup>47</sup> Indeed, many later critics championed this type of film style as necessary for overcoming the racist biases of Hollywood film form, much as 1970s feminist filmmakers called for the modification of Hollywood's visual pleasures and narrative style.<sup>48</sup>

Most important, *Ganja and Hess* expands generic parameters by blurring the binary oppositions between normality and monsters. In fact, there are few "normal" people in the film—no Professor Van Helsing out to kill the vampires, just monsters dealing with the philosophical and moral dilemmas of their beings and, as one black critic put it, "finger[ing] capitalism, Christianity, and colonialist Egypto/anthro/archaeo tamperings as the triple-hell horrors."<sup>49</sup> The film argues that an addiction of any sort, whether to blood, religion, drugs, or sex, is morally equivalent to any other. For example, Hess Green invokes Jesus Christ and the Last Supper several times throughout the film, most pointedly when he makes Ganja into a vampire. Somewhat later, Hess makes a philosophically queer observation about "normality" and his particular desires: "The only perversions that can be comfortably condemned are the perversions of others. I will persist and survive without God's or society's sanction. I will not be tortured. I will not be punished. I will not be guilty." In interviews, filmmaker Gunn espoused a proto-queer philosophy, arguing that heterosexuality and homosexuality are myths and that racial identity is also fluid and constantly changing.<sup>50</sup>

At the heart of the film lies vampirism as a metaphor for capitalism and cultural imperialism, dramatizing in horror movie iconography how some human beings live off the blood, sweat, and toil of others—what one latter-day commentator called a "symbolic portrayal of a completely Europeanized black man."<sup>51</sup> Shifting this idea into the African American community specifically foregrounds a critique

of assimilationist blacks. The wealthy and privileged Ganja and Hess use their money to isolate themselves from the black community, although they feed off it, as when Hess stalks pimps and prostitutes for blood or Ganja feeds on a volunteer from the local black resource center. Thus, Ganja and Hess symbolize the "real-life" issues that plague the African American community, such as drug abuse or selling out to materialism. Once again the film complicates these easy metaphors, however, because the characters are both the perpetrators of violence and the victims of it, a theme enunciated early in the film when Hess's assistant, George Meda (played by Gunn himself), expounds on the paradoxical nature of suicide: the victim is also the victimizer.

Within the film's ambiguous diegesis, Hess finally allows himself to be destroyed by somewhat traditional means, first by embracing the black Christian church and then by committing suicide in the shadow of the cross, an act that raises pertinent questions about the relationship between Christianity and African American culture. Within the film, vampirism is Afrocentric (the cause of Hess's vampirism is traced back to Africa and remembered in flashbacks as a pre-Christian garden). Thus, when he succumbs to Western Christian morality, he seems to be denying his African heritage. As Manthia Diawara and Phyllis R. Klotman note, "The minister exhorts his parishioners to turn back on Africa's dark moment and to trace history from the time Christ arrived. It is in this sense that we see Christ as the hero of the minister's narrative, and the Africans—and [Hess] Green, when he was following their example—as the villains."<sup>52</sup> The film therefore partakes of but also comments on the usual generic function of race and religion—race colors the monster as he or she is defined by a Western Christian patriarchal ideology. Still, the film ends with Ganja continuing her vampiric lifestyle. As Diawara and Klotman observe, "Ganja is a contemporary black woman. She is tired of being subservient to the church and to black men. She's glad that Meda and Hess, the self-destructive artist and the bourgeois patriarch, are gone."<sup>53</sup> She survives Hess's crisis of suicide and proudly carries on her monstrously queer Afrocentric existence.

Although the classic horror genre's relation to race is reworked in *Ganja and Hess* in much more careful and intricate detail than in any of the blaxploitation films discussed above, neither white critics nor black horror film audiences appreciated its art-house style and theoretical musings. Even though the film was selected for a Critics' Week screening at Cannes (and was cheered loudly), most mainstream white reviewers dismissed the film as a "confusingly vague mélange of symbolism, violence and sex."<sup>54</sup> After negative reactions to initial screenings, the backers of the film recut and rereleased it as *Double Possession* and *Blood Couple*, trying to market it as a blaxploitation possession film about a sexually monstrous woman: "The Devil wanted their souls—she wanted their bodies . . . and more!"<sup>55</sup> The film was no more successful in this cut, and it remains very hard to see, despite being reconstructed by Third World Newsreel in the 1980s. *Ganja and Hess* attempted to use the horror film as a means of interrogating the socially constructed and ever-contested interlocking territories not only of race but of gender, sexuality, religion, and class. Pigeonholed into the existing categories of blaxploitation genre

film or independent art film, *Ganja and Hess* satisfied neither audience and fell into oblivion.

**Conclusion.** Blaxploitation horror films had a significant impact on the genre's evolution. As pop-culture signifiers of the growing public awareness about race and racial inequity, these films exposed and opposed the genre's historically racist structuring principles, even though female gender and sexuality were still often figured as central conceits of monstrous Otherness. By embracing the racialized monster and turning him or her into an agent of black pride and power, blaxploitation horror films created sympathetic monsters who helped shift audience identification away from the status quo "normality" of bourgeois white society. In some cases, they exposed white "normality," and especially white patriarchy, as productive of monsters. And, as is frequently the case with subcultural aesthetic innovations, those practices predated the mainstream media's eventual co-optation of them. For example, the softer and romanticized *Blacula* character became a staple of Hollywood's big-budgeted *Dracula* remakes, both in 1979 and 1992. The philosophical musings of *Ganja and Hess's* vampires became the cornerstone of Anne Rice's highly successful *Vampire Chronicles*, another recent genre reworking that attempts to mine the genre for more politically correct ideas.

While many media critics did (and still do) decry blaxploitation filmmaking, it nonetheless enabled many black film artists to gain a foothold in the industry, even as white Hollywood profited from the films' success.<sup>56</sup> Many black leaders called for Hollywood to be more sensitive to black concerns and to divert some of the films' earnings back into black communities, while still others called for the formation of radical independent black filmmaking co-ops organized from preexisting black theater groups.<sup>57</sup> Others, like Bill Lane, the pragmatic film commentator for the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, found himself defending blaxploitation movies even though he understood their potentially problematic implications. Lane also understood the films' marketplace and the need for commercially viable (i.e., Hollywood-style) product when he wrote: "Just say black producers suddenly got hold of unlimited film-making funds, and they decided to turn out only 'meaningful' black movies. They'd be broke in a year."<sup>58</sup> Such was the case with *Ganja and Hess's* production team of Quentin Kelly and Jack Jordan. They wanted to make "quality" films, not "headbusting films [in which] blacks beat up on whites," but their films did not find an audience.<sup>59</sup>

Inherent in many of these debates is the mistaken notion that a Hollywood genre film, or a blaxploitation genre film, could not, by its very nature, be political. Aside from the simplistic dichotomy Hollywood genres = bad and serious independent films = good, these discussions often lacked an appreciation of how the narrative and thematic structures of American film genres work to reinforce (or, more rarely, challenge) dominant ideologies. The supernatural narratives of blaxploitation horror films, or slightly earlier fantastic race-switching films such as *A Change of Mind* (1969) or *Watermelon Man* (1970), employed generic formulas for very pointed political ends. These themes could be ludicrously exploited in a film such as *The Thing with Two Heads*, in which white supremacist Ray Milland's head is

sutured to Rosey Grier's body, but even here there is some critique of American racism. As the *Los Angeles Times* reviewer noted at the time, "Any picture that can point up the absurdity and cruelty of racial prejudice with such incessant laughter deserves respect. . . . [The film] develops terrific symbolic impact as we watch Grier struggle with Milland for control, over what is, after all, his own body. The various ironies of Grier's plight will be appreciated by many whites—and, it seems safe to say, all blacks."<sup>60</sup> This review partakes of a certain cultural imperialism—professing to know how "all blacks" will relate to such a text—and, in so doing, raises another important issue of hegemonic white control: how the white mainstream media shape public opinion about black cultural products, and how those racial hierarchies intertwine with the class-based categories of high and low art.<sup>61</sup>

Even today, despite the postmodernist pressure encouraging the collapsing of boundaries, many specific filmic and cultural categories remain firmly in place. Serious art films are worthy of consideration by high-minded adults, while genre films remain exploitative nonsense for younger viewers. The recent box-office failure of *Beloved* (1998) would seem to attest to the earlier audience's inability to accept serious message filmmaking and horror movie iconography both in one text. On the opposite pole, many critics and fans of the horror genre feel that the film fails "as a horror film" if it draws attention to sociopolitical ideas, that by making people think they will stop being scared.<sup>62</sup> But that is precisely the point, for surely what is most political about a horror film is what scares the audience in the first place. Acknowledging and understanding how the deep structures of popular generic media figure race, gender, sexuality, or any discourse of Otherness is an important aspect of media studies; these forms and artifacts help define the current and future landscape of media culture and, by extension, our own social and historical realities.

## Notes

1. See Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in Bill Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2 (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 195–220, for a concise statement of these theses. Specifically, Wood isolates eight variables of Otherness that the horror film has encoded and exploited: other people, generally, but also women, the proletariat, other cultures, ethnic groups within dominant American culture, alternative political systems, queer sexualities, and children.
2. The classical Hollywood horror film is arguably one of the more explicitly racist of Hollywood genres, frequently using ethnic and racial coding to (quite literally) "color" its monsters. Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi, the era's most successful box-office monster actors, were Caucasian but quite pointedly not American. (Actually, there is some speculation that Karloff may have been of mixed race. See Gregory William Mank, *Karloff and Lugosi: The Story of a Haunting Collaboration* [Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1990], 18.) Karloff's and Lugosi's characters were often assisted by nonwhite henchmen, such as those played by black actor and filmmaker Noble Johnson in *The Mummy* (1932) and *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1932). Often bare-chested and silent, these large black men presented a generic twist on the usual black "buck" stereotype, displaying a sexualized and racialized hypermasculinity as threatening and monstrous, much as did the classical horror film's most recognizable racial monster: the zombie.



Other classical Hollywood horror films used race in more metaphoric ways. Perhaps most famously, many latter-day critics have understood *King Kong* as metaphorically displaying white fears of a "primitive" black sexuality running amok among white women and white civilization. Other critics have argued that *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) should be understood in reference to prevailing notions of race and the horrors of lynching. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931) can also be seen as part of a racist imaginary about the brutal and voraciously sexual Negro: the character's transformation from white doctor to monster is effected by progressively darker makeup, kinkier hair, fuller lips, and a rampant, violent sexuality. Indeed, this bestial link of animals and humans is a common theme of the classical horror film, from *Island of Lost Souls* (1933) to *The Wolf Man* (1941); it also happens to be one of the era's most virulently racist tropes—the belief that black people were somehow less evolved than were whites, making them the "missing link" between white people and apes.

For more on race and the horror film, see Rhona J. Berenstein, *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Elizabeth Young, "Here Comes the Bride: Wedding Gender and Race in *Bride of Frankenstein*," in Barry Keith Grant, ed., *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 309–37; and Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

3. Even contemporary films are still marketed for segregated audiences. For example, *Variety's* review of the black horror film *Tales from the Hood* (1995) says that the film "should scare up big bucks in urban markets. While aimed primarily at black audiences, it has strong crossover potential." Joe Leydon, "Tales from the Hood," *Variety*, May 29, 1995.
4. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 41.
5. Lester D. Friedman, "Celluloid Palimpsests: An Overview of Ethnicity and the American Film," in Lester D. Friedman, ed., *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 18–19.
6. Harold R. Issacs, "Basic Group Identity: The Idols of the Tribe," *Ethnicity* 1 (April 1974): 20.
7. See Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997). See also Rhona J. Berenstein and Sue Ellen Case, "Tracking the Vampire," *differences* 3, no. 2 (summer 1991): 1–20.
8. Nelson George, *Blackface: Reflections on African-Americans and the Movies* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 87.
9. Darius James, *That's Blaxploitation!* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), xx.
10. *Ibid.*, xxii.
11. A good narrative history of the blaxploitation era is in Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*. See also Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* (New York: Continuum, 1989); Daniel Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975); and James, *That's Blaxploitation!*
12. James P. Murray, "Now, a Boom in Black Directors," *New York Times*, June 8, 1972, D11.
13. Many middle-class blacks, including psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint, argued that these films represented a renewed racist attack on the black community by white filmmakers. See Poussaint, "Stimulus/Response: Blaxploitation Movies—Cheap Films That Degrade Blacks," *Psychology Today* (February 1974): 22, 26–27, 30, 32, 98. Tony Brown, the host of *Black Journal*, a PBS public affairs show aimed at the black community,

- called these films "the ultimate in self-hate. . . . going to see yourself as a drug dealer when you're oppressed is sick. Not only are blacks identifying with this degenerate drug pusher, they're paying for the identification. It's sort of like a Jew paying to get into a concentration camp." Tony Brown is quoted in "Black Journal: Award Winning Producer Blasts Black Films," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 18, 1973, B1.
14. George Lipsitz, "Genre Anxiety and Racial Representation in 1970s Cinema," in Nick Browne, ed., *Refiguring American Film Genres, History, and Theory* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 216-20.
  15. Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 171.
  16. Artist and independent filmmaker Bill Gunn, who directed the art-vampire movie *Ganja and Hess* (1973), was one of the few black people at the time to disparage *Sounder*. He noted that the simple story was based on a "children's book, for ages eight to twelve. It was watered down from that and made into a film for black adults. So, that should give you a hint as to what the studios think of our minds." Quoted in Maurice Peterson, "Movies: Interview with Bill Gunn," *Essence* (October 1973): 27, 96.
  17. "U.S. Black Films Failing in Europe," *Variety*, May 8, 1974, 1, 54.
  18. "People Are Talking About . . .," *Jet*, April 6, 1972, 41.
  19. "Black Actors Say *Kong* Film Won't Make Them Monkeys," *Jet*, February 12, 1976, 62.
  20. Noted in Jack Fincher, "Black Hollywood," *Life Movies*, January 23, 1970, M20.
  21. Quoted in Kevin Thomas, "*Blacula* Has Effect on Marshall," *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 1972.
  22. For example: "in *Blacula* (yes, even this) Denise Nicholas and Vonetta McGee are sensitive human beings and not sex objects. William Marshall and Thalmus Rasulala are intelligent men and give fine performances." Arthur Johnson, "Letter to the Editor," *New York Times*, September 10, 1972.
  23. Stephanie Jack, "Left Me Void of Recommendations," (*San Francisco*) *Sun Reporter*, August 26, 1972, 32.
  24. Alan Swyer, "Movie Review: *Blacula* Has Touch of Quality," *Hollywood Reporter*, July 25, 1972.
  25. Bridget Byrne, "Film News: *Blacula* More than Horror Epic," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, March 1, 1972.
  26. Jessie Mae Brown, "Family," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, November 2, 1972.
  27. B. J. Mason, "The New Films: Culture or Con Game?" *Ebony* (December 1972): 62.
  28. "*Blackenstein* Movie in Planning Stage," *Jet*, August 24, 1972, 56.
  29. The film was produced by Joe R. Hartsfield's Chocolate Chip Productions. Hartsfield Productions was the first black-owned film production company to be accepted into membership in the Association of Motion Picture and Television Producers. See "Tight \$300,000 Budget Transforms *Skull* Filming into Dramatic Race," *BoxOffice*, June 25, 1973.
  30. "51 Black-Oriented Films Produced Since Mid-1970," *Jet*, September 21, 1972, 36.
  31. Review of *Sugar Hill*, *BoxOffice*, March 4, 1974.
  32. Michael Weldon, *The Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), 65.
  33. Quoted in James R. Parish and George H. Hill, *Black Action Films* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1989), 289.
  34. Ronald Green, "'Twoness' in the Style of Oscar Micheaux," in Manthia Diawara, ed., *Black American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 27.
  35. *Abby*, which was known briefly during its production as *Possess My Soul* and *The*

- Blaxorcist*, was a box-office hit for AIP, but the film was withdrawn from circulation after its initial run as the result of a lawsuit filed by Warner Bros., which claimed that the film was too closely based on their film *The Exorcist* (1973). See "WB, AIP Settle *Abby* Controversy," *Hollywood Reporter*, December 16, 1977.
36. "Possess My Soul Now Underway in Hollywood," *BoxOffice*, April 15, 1974.
  37. Eshu (Esu-Elegbara) is actually a very complex Yoruba god, not the Christian-constructed bogeyman of sex, as the film would have it. The trickster guardian of the crossroads, Eshu combines both good and bad, male and female; Eshu thus embodies paradox, indeterminacy, and the dialectical principle. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 23–43.
  38. Phil Brookes, review of *Abby*, *Players* (March 1975).
  39. See, for example, Ronald E. Kisner, "What Films Are Doing to Image of Black Women," *Jet*, June 29, 1972, 56–61.
  40. Alan R. Howard, review of *Scream Blacula Scream*, *Hollywood Reporter*, July 3, 1973.
  41. Maurice Peterson, "Films: Black Imagery on the Silver Screen," *Essence* (December 1972): 34.
  42. Liz Gant, "Ain't Beulah Dead Yet?" *Essence* (May 1973): 61, 72–75.
  43. Mary O'Neal, "P.O.V.: Tricked by Flicks," *Essence* (October 1974): 17.
  44. Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Dial Press, 1978).
  45. Judith Rollins, "Do Clothes Unmake the Man?" *Black World* (May 1974): 86–87.
  46. Maurice Peterson, "Movies: Interview with Bill Gunn," *Essence* (October 1973): 27, 96.
  47. Manthia Diawara, "Black American Cinema: The New Realism," in Diawara, *Black American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 10.
  48. Other black film theorists have also argued for the "demythification and demystification of institutionalized cinema. Instead of seeking to emulate the Hollywood tradition, black cinema must establish its own ground—its own modes of production and symbolic images." Gladstone L. Yearwood, "Towards a Theory of a Black Cinema Aesthetic," in Yearwood, ed., *Black Cinema Aesthetics: Issues in Independent Black Filmmaking* (Athens: Ohio University Center for Afro-American Studies, 1982), 67. See also Diawara, "Black American Cinema," and Tommy L. Lott, "A No-Theory Theory of Black Cinema," in Valerie Smith, ed., *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 83–96.
  49. Toni Cade Bambara, "Reading the Signs, Empowering the Eye: *Daughters of the Dust* and the Black Independent Cinema Movement," in Diawara, *Black American Cinema*, 138.
  50. Janus Ingrid Adams, "Interview [with] Bill Gunn: We Should Burn All the Books and Start All Over Again," *Encore* (June 1973): 54–57.
  51. Description of *Ganja and Hess* in a program for "On Black Film: A Film and Lecture Series Presented by the Annenberg Center for Communication Arts and Sciences," University of Pennsylvania, circa 1975. Clipping on file at the Margaret Herrick Library at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles.
  52. Manthia Diawara and Phyllis R. Klotman, "*Ganja and Hess*: Vampires, Sex, and Addictions," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 2 (summer 1991): 307.
  53. *Ibid.*, 314.
  54. A. H. Weiler, review of *Ganja and Hess*, *New York Times*, April 20, 1973, 19:2.
  55. This second ad campaign very obviously copied that of *Abby*, citing the film's characters as "The First Husband, The Second Husband, Her Victim, and The Exorcist." *Abby's* advertising featured a similar central photograph of the protagonist with four

- smaller boxed-off photos identified as "Her Husband, Her Brother, Her Friend, [and] The Exorcist."
56. One should remember that during this era African Americans were still struggling to break into the formerly all-white Hollywood trade unions. Melvin Van Peebles noted that "black movies are giving Third World technicians the chance to learn their skills." Quoted in "Words of the Week," *Jet*, September 21, 1972, 36.
  57. Richard Wesley, "Opinion: Toward a Viable Black Film Industry," *Black World* (July 1973): 28.
  58. Bill Lane, "people, places 'n' situwayshuns," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 31, 1972, B2A.
  59. Quoted in Frank Segers, "Quentin Kelly Enterprises Succeeds Two-Tone Producing Partnership; No 'Headbusting' of Whites," *Variety*, November 20, 1974.
  60. Kevin Thomas, "Symbolic Impact in *Two Heads*," *Los Angeles Times*, December 5, 1972.
  61. A good case in point was Bill Gunn's attack on the white critical establishment, which savaged his film *Ganja and Hess* (1973). After noting that many reviewers personally demeaned both him and his actors, got significant details of the film's plot wrong, and neglected to say it was chosen to be screened at Cannes, Gunn argued for more black input into media reviews, arguing that "your newspapers and critics must realize that they are controlling black theater and film creativity with white criticism." Bill Gunn, "To Be a Black Artist" (Letter to the Editor), *New York Times*, May 13, 1973, 30.
  62. See again Stephanie Jack's review of *Blacula*, in which she noted that "as a horror film it just didn't make it—one reason perhaps was because *Blacula* himself was so likable and so much a victim himself." Jack, [*San Francisco*] *Sun Reporter*, August 26, 1972, 32.

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