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LAURA ISHERWOOD.

Framing Blackness and Appropriating Monstrosity in *Blacula*

LAURA ISHERWOOD

ABSTRACT

This article considers how the Blaxploitation horror classic *Blacula* (1972) frames and (re)appropriates race, blackness, and monstrosity where genres meet. An analysis of *Blacula* illustrates how African-American filmmakers and audiences profited from Hollywood's shifting priorities in the late 1960s as a means to enable black agency, both on the production side and in its powerful (counter) narrative. By creating a complex and sympathetic monster that is simultaneously an agent of black pride, *Blacula* brings the forgotten history of a marginalized racial community to the silver screen, encourages societal critique, and reflects the shift that took place in African-American identity politics amidst the rise of Black Nationalism in the United States.

> You shall pay, black prince. I shall place a curse of suffering on
> you that will doom you to a living hell. A hunger, a wild, gnawing,
> animal hunger will grow in you, a hunger for human blood. Here
> you will starve for an eternity, torn by an unquenchable lust. I
> curse you with my name. You shall be, Blacula!
> — Count Dracula in *Blacula* (1972)

Lightning bolts brighten up the sky against the backdrop of Count
Dracula's medieval castle as these words reverberate through the
darkness of a basement. The Count summons a troop of female vampires
to overpower Mamuwalde, a noble West-African prince, before he curses
him with vampirism: a punishment for condemning the slave trade and
judging the Count for benefitting from an immoral practice. In doing
so, *Blacula*'s opening scenes link the original Dracula narrative — by
now a classic formula for vampire films — to a very different kind of
storyline, while still respecting historical accuracy. That is, the history
of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The monster that is created in this
scene is Blacula: a black antihero who is driven by love but condemned
to a wretched existence by his unfortunate fate.

    Blacula (1972) was the first in a series of successful black horror
movies released in the early 70s during Hollywood's short-lived black
movie boom, better known as the era of "Blaxploitation." Blaxploitation
horror movies like *Blacula* illustrate how the motion-picture industry
set out to reimagine a classic cinematic genre from the perspective
of blackness. These productions targeted young black audiences by
tackling topics that spoke to black inner-city experience, and brought
the heroes of young African Americans to the silver screen, something
for which they had yearned for so long. On the one hand, this shift was
Hollywood's reaction to increasing race consciousness on America's
domestic front, as well as an answer to pressures from civil rights
organizations pushing for more complex cinematic representations
of African Americans. On the other hand, the black movie boom
received plenty of criticism. Hollywood was castigated for exploiting
black audiences and instating new racial stereotypes that once again
circumscribed black representation. As horror films traditionally hinge
on filmically constructed fears of the other — oscillating between

representations of the "normal" and "monstrous" while confronting the audience with that which it fears and despises—the Blaxploitation horror flick offers a particularly alluring topic of analysis. Blaxploitation celebrates racial difference whereas horror traditionally vilifies this marker of alterity. Consequentially, in Blaxploitation horror, that which may normally be considered "monstrous" now appears less abject and potentially even desirable. Blaxploitation horror effectively reclaimed and reframed race, turning the white man's monster into an agent of black pride, redirecting audience sympathy and redrawing looking relations (hooks 121). These productions illustrate how a racial minority constructed a cultural identity when the strategies of identity politics shifted dramatically in a postcolonial America that was coming to terms with its history of institutionalized racism, and was kept under the watchful eye of a critical international community.

This paper will examine the Blaxploitation cult-classic *Blacula* with a focus on its representation of blackness, race, and monstrosity. *Blacula* is approached as a cultural text that appropriates a classic plot and generic structure in order to offer a powerful and critical counter narrative at the intersection of genres: Blaxploitation and horror (Benshoff 38). In doing this, *Blacula* highlights black experience, addresses societal malaise, and redirects audience sympathy. This paper sets out to determine in what way *Blacula* addresses the legacies of colonialism and enables black agency, both from the perspective of production and spectatorship.

Agency and Black Spectatorship

In one of the most authoritative texts from the field of film studies, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema," feminist film-scholar Laura Mulvey theorizes the "male gaze." In her work, Mulvey argues that the unconscious forces of patriarchal society transform and subject images of women on screen into passive objects of a voyeuristic, active "male gaze." She claims that cinema highlights a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness *and* determines the way she should be looked at. At the same time, spectators cannot escape the gaze, and lose their ability to create distance between the image in front of them and themselves.

A powerful, but radical statement. To this school of feminist theory bell hooks offers a sharp critique to this school of feminist theory, arguing it refuses to acknowledge the importance of race in black female spectatorship (hooks 295). She pleads for the recognition of the *agency* of black spectators and their ability to cultivate a critical position: an oppositional gaze that politicizes looking relations and delights in interrogation. This attitude is key in challenging power structures that assume the dominated consumes images uncritically and in highly circumscribed ways. Stuart Hall also criticizes Mulvey's theorization of the "totalizing and inescapable" gaze, reinstating agency with both black producers and spectators (Hall 107). He conceptualizes popular culture as a "theatre" of popular desires and fantasies, an arena where we are imagined and represented to ourselves as well as to others. It is here that one can discover and play with identifications of the Self (113). Employing these cultural strategies can make a difference in the dispositions of power: in other words, this is where the revolutionary potential of popular culture lies.

Mulvey, hooks, and Hall's theories articulate the importance of analyzing cultural products from the perspective of blackness, and demonstrate the potential that popular cinema holds in producing counter narratives that are empowering to both black male and female spectators. The horror genre is of particular interest from this perspective as it hinges on notions of "otherness" and "monstrosity." In the process of constructing monstrosity, race is often employed as a marker of difference. Barbara Creed has argued that horror thrives on filmic images of abjection and the concept of the "border" is central to the construction of the monster. Monstrosity is created on the boundary of what *is* and what is *not* abject. This can be on the border of human and inhuman, man and beast, natural and supernatural, good and evil, normal and abnormal sexual desire, and between conformity to — and rejection of — proper gender roles (Creed 253). Race, gender, sexuality, and class have traditionally been markers of otherness and monstrosity in horror films while white, middle-class heterosexuality has been rendered the "norm." In the horror film, the function of monstrosity is to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and anything that may threaten its stability (253). Confrontations with

that which is abject are significant, as they have the ideological power to redraw boundaries between the human and the non-human (257). Horror films demonize difference, whether racial, sexual or otherwise. Consequentially, the black other is a common feature in the horror film, signifying monstrosity. Reminiscent of what Hall calls "cultural strategies," horror, as a product of popular culture, has the power to reflect, confirm, and even challenge popular attitudes concerning race and racism by means of "confrontations." Such confrontations are common in the Blaxploitation horror film, ultimately providing African-American agency — both on the production and spectatorship side — when viewed through the lens of a marginalized racial collective (Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films* 67). Blaxploitation horror refigures and recasts generic tenets of "normality" and "monstrosity."

The era of Blaxploitation illustrates how Hollywood anticipated and capitalized on societal changes, to a large degree out of self-interest. The term Blaxploitation refers to sixty or so cinematic productions released between 1969 and 1974 that were in some way or another marked by black involvement. Blaxploitation films were rarely all-black productions, but *did* boast large black casts. With limited budgets these were fairly cheaply made products that targeted young, black urban audiences. Plots highlighted black experience in America, particularly in inner-city areas. Common themes included the perils of drug use, police brutality, and racial profiling (Lawrence, "Fear" 20). Rhythm-and-blues soundtracks recorded by well-known or up-and-coming African-American artists accompanied these pictures. In general, Blaxploitation proudly orchestrated black talent. Most importantly, this genre created black characters that were socially and politically conscious and able to survive in, as well as navigate within the establishment, while maintaining their lackness.

In the 1950s and 60s the American social, political, and economic landscape altered dramatically, impacting the struggle for equality on the domestic front. African-American veterans who joined in battle during the Second World War were returning home, the Civil Rights Movement was gaining momentum, and the Vietnam War challenged America's superpower status. These developments fueled

African-American identity politics. Blaxploitation's immediate success
had a lot to do with the fact that Hollywood had grown so out of touch
with the rising demand for assertive and believable black images on
screen (Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films* 76). Black audiences had
grown tired of the "ebony saint" character—a powerless, assimilationist
and sexless black male, living in a white world, solving white people's
problems—personified by the successful black actor Sidney Poitier
(Guerrero 78). Blaxploitation's disposal of this emasculated trope
was an answer to a call for a new sense of black manhood (Massood
82). Moreover, the rhetoric changed as Black Nationalism exchanged
integration and assimilation for separation and cultural nationalism. A
growing feeling of insurrection and cultural separation was encouraged
by an overall sense of rebellion in the 1960s, as other emergent
collectivities—such as the Chicanos, anti-war groups, the gay liberation
movement, and the women's movement—struggled for recognition
(Massood 71). As Poitier slipped into irrelevance, black athletes such
as Woody Strode and Fred Williamson were cast as "badass n**gers":
sexually liberated violent black macho men who fought against white
villains (Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films* 19–20). This was a definitive
departure from the expired black bourgeois ideal of mimicking
middle-class white culture as a means to tackle stereotypes.

Hollywood's focus on the production of Blaxploitation films in
the late 60s and early 70s must also be understood as a conscious
marketing strategy. A shift in focus of the marketed audience was
largely a means to prevent the industry's demise as it encountered
financial difficulties. Hollywood had hit hard times as the popularity of
television rose and its audience fragmented. It now needed to market
to a youthful, well-educated, and liberal moviegoers, while competing
with foreign films at the same time (Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films*
82). A logical move was to target inner-city black audiences, because
at this point the black box office accounted for at least thirty to forty
percent (Massood 82). The black dominance in the box office had
been the consequence of demographic shifts in American urban areas.
In the 1960s and 70s about 1.5 million African Americans left the
South, hoping for better socioeconomic opportunities up North and
West. At the same time, white people flocked away from big cities,

exchanging the urban lifestyle for the suburbs (Massood 82). Because the black demographic was much younger than its white counterpart, African Americans quickly came to dominate the youth market. In order to commit to this new audience, Hollywood had to play into their expectations. Hollywood's black movie boom hit two birds with one stone: it was a short-term solution to divert financial problems, and it was an answer to social and political pressure from civil rights groups. This is where Blaxploitation earned its cynical title: a cinematic genre exploiting black audiences.

The horror genre was no exception to the Blaxploitation craze. Classics were reimagined from the perspective of blackness for young African-American audiences. *Dracula* became *Blacula* (1972) and *Frankenstein* became *Blackenstein* (1973). Contrary to what these titles suggest, "black horror" producers in the 1970s did not simply recycle preexisting formats but effectively reshaped and (re)appropriated generic formats for more overtly political goals (Coleman 119). Whereas vampire films of the late 1960s were fairly conservative — demonizing both racial and sexual difference as potential threats to the established order — in black horror, the Whites' monster is transformed into an agent of Black Power; monsters become black avengers fighting against — or vengeful towards — the dominant markedly racist order. The existence of the monster becomes an allegory for the historical experience of African Americans (Benshoff 39). By creating sympathetic monsters that are sensitive to black concerns or even agents of black pride, audience identification is steered away from white middle-class "normalcy" while critical attitudes towards white patriarchy are fostered (Benshoff 45). Blaxploitation horror productions therefore signify growing public awareness of race and racism, both in society and embedded within the generic structures of the horror film itself. These can therefore be considered successful products in the postcolonial cultural industry.

Blacula: a Blaxploitation Horror Classic
With a Critical Dialogue

American International Pictures (AIP) was one of the leading producers of Blaxploitation films, producing several successful horror pictures in the 1950s and 60s. This made them eager to consider testing the "black horror formula" (Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films* 48). *Blacula* was the first and commercially most successful Blaxploitation horror film, soon becoming the "gold standard" for recreating a white horror classic in the image of blackness (Coleman 120). The black filmmaker William Crain was appointed as director, and William Marshall was cast in the lead role. *Blacula* is immediately recognizable as a Blaxploitation production, orchestrating black talent with its large black cast. The film is set in inner-city Los Angeles, an urban area predominantly populated by African Americans in the 1970s (Massood 84; Guerrero 84). The "black macho" figure is personified by Dr. Gordon Thomas, a homicide investigator. Thomas functions professionally in a white-dominated world, while always staying "true" to his black heritage. *Blacula* explores (the loss of) black identity, black heritage, and racism by means of the vampire story.

As dicussed above, in the horror genre monstrosity is created on the "border" (Creed 253). In *Blacula*, monstrosity is created on the "border" of man and beast, normal and supernatural, good and evil, modern and pre-modern. The monster in *Blacula* is of course Mamuwalde: a noble African prince with abolitionist sympathies, cursed with vampirism by the relentless and opportunistic Count Dracula. Relocated in time and space, Blacula awakens in Los Angeles. He immediately struggles to blend into the crowd in the modern metropole. After being locked in a coffin for two centuries his appearance is archaic and out-of-place: Mamuwalde roams the city dressed in a black suit and cape, clearly unaccustomed to its etiquette. Flash photography frightens him, his speech-patterns are off and he struggles to understand traffic rules, and is consequentially hit by a taxi as he runs into the middle of the road. Mamuwalde's presence in the urban jungle is bizarre and the modern black characters of the film notice this immediately. One comments on his eccentric appearance: "That is one strange dude…" In these scenes Mamuwalde's otherness is constructed by his

pre-modernity and his struggle to fit in. Even though Mamuwalde is well versed and dresses like a gentleman, he is in a constant fight with his animalistic craving for blood. When he *does* control his urges he appears clean-shaven, but as soon as night falls and he targets his victims, the fangs become visible and hair grows on his cheeks: with his thick black hair as a signifier for danger, Blacula is half-way between a vampire and a werewolf. As such, despite his sophistication and nobility, the black vampire is closer to a beast than a human compared to his white counterpart: Dracula.

Mamuwalde's blackness pushes him further from the border of humanity/inhumanity than is the case with his white equivalent. Not only is he a vampire, a supernatural being, but he is always a moment away from turning into a wild and hairy beast. Equating race, or blackness, to "the beast" is a common trope employed by Hollywood in black representation, especially concerning sexuality and the fear of miscegenation (Modleski 327). In this fantasy, the black sexual predator is considered dangerous, and more likely to succumb to primordial urges, posing an immediate threat to white womanhood. Whereas the movie poster — which shows a white woman being attacked by Mamuwalde — suggests otherwise, *Blacula* avoids heterosexual miscegenation. This appears to be a conscious marketing effort to adjust the demeaning tropes that conscribed black representation in Hollywood, while at the same time mobilizing white fears to draw white audiences. Nevertheless, by carefully avoiding miscegenation white men and women can still comfortably experience the spectacle of cinema without being confronted with threatening black images.

Blacula's character also balances on the border of good and evil. Even though he is a monster who commits cold-blooded murder, he is a sympathetic one. The audience recognizes that Mamuwalde does not deserve the curse that has been cast upon him. In his previous life, Mamuwalde was a proud African and dedicated abolitionist on a dignified mission. In his second "life" as vampire he does not lose this human touch. While wreaking havoc in the streets of Los Angeles Mamuwalde acts out of love for his wife, Luva, whose soul he believes has been reincarnated in Tina. And so he murders a photographer *only* so he can destroy the photograph she has taken, as it will reveal to Tina

he has no soul. When Thomas, the leading homicide investigator, asks Tina to stay away from Mamuwalde for her own safety, she can hardly believe he is capable of cruelty, exclaiming in disbelief: "He killed him [a police officer]?!"

Importantly, Mamuwalde is not denied sexuality. He rediscovers romantic and physical love with Tina. Even though sexual intercourse is presumably one of the "purest primordial urges,"—and therefore dangerous to unleash, as the vampire's instinctual thirst for blood will endanger white womanhood—Mamuwalde stays in control at all times. His sexuality is empowering and functions as a conscious disposal of the "ebony saint" character (Guerrero 78). The power of love prompts Mamuwalde to court Tina and (almost) save her life. When Luva is heavily injured as a consequence of a gunshot wound, Mamuwalde bites her to "save" her—turning her into a vampire—but *only* after her approval. Mamuwalde explains: "Forgive me, for this is the only way I will be with you forever." Despite this humanity, Mamuwalde is denied a happy ending, which reinstates his monstrosity. Tina—now a vampire—is tragically murdered with a wooden stake after being mistaken for Blacula. After losing love for the second time, Mamuwalde takes his own life. As he emerges into the sunlight he utters his final words: "What is left for this cursed character? His only reason for living is taken away."

The author of the script has explained that the storyline in which Mamuwalde is drawn to Luva was added after the leading actor William Marshall recommended that he do so. Marshall wanted Mamuwalde to court Luva, because to him she was the embodiment of all the virtues and riches that represented Africa: his stolen heritage (Lehman 25). By following his suggestions the producers hoped to establish the human side of the vampire, making the monster someone with whom the audience could empathize. Here, the revolutionary potential of Blaxploitation becomes apparent: a white producing company followed Marshall's advice. This shows how Hollywood's "exploitation" of black audiences in the 1970s opened up opportunities for black filmmakers and black perspectives in general.

Mamuwalde as Blacula is a monster, a manipulative cop-killer that shows little remorse and is out of touch with modern times. With

a hypnotic gaze and an obsessive, eccentric personality he stalks and controls Tina, but in the end he does all of this out of love. Despite his wild nature, the spectators' sympathy is directed towards Mamuwalde. The curse of vampirism that is cast upon him is framed as unfortunate and undeserved. Blacula may be the monster, but he is ultimately the product of the white patriarchy (Benshoff 31). Count Dracula is represented less sympathetically: he is the *true* repository of evil. Even though he stars for a total of four minutes, his presence is felt throughout. Dracula is a racist, misogynist snob who seals the tragic fate of good-hearted and sincere African abolitionists. Despite his blackness, the audience, even the white spectator, is more likely to identify with Mamuwalde as Blacula than with any of the white characters. Black participation in the horror film has traditionally been demonized, framed as childlike, carrying taint, lower in socioeconomic standing, or a metaphor and catalyst of evil (Coleman 9). But *Blacula* effectively inverts these tropes, employing the horror genre as a vehicle of empowerment, and by rewriting sites of heroism and evil through a "confrontation" with that which threatens stability and humanity.

Conclusion

The Blaxploitation horror film *Blacula* was one of the highest grossing movies of its time, yielding such incredible box-office success that it became the "gold standard" for black horror. However, *Blacula* did more than desegregate a previously all-white genre. The film's (re)appropriation of race and generic structures set the stage for a powerful counter narrative challenging the commercial cinema industry's dominant imagery of blackness. *Blacula* authorized double-edged critique at the intersection of genres. A closer look at this cult classic illustrates how racial "otherness" was effectively marketed to black *and* white audiences in one of the most popular and influential cultural industries in the postcolonial Atlantic world. *Blacula* warranted black agency, both on the production side and in its narrative structures. The film also reflects the significant shift that took place in African-American identity politics of the early 1970s: Blaxploitation foregrounded black pride, proclaiming non-violent, assimilationist

ideals bankrupt and replacing the "ebony saint" with the black macho figure. *Blacula*'s societal critique is incredibly sharp, engendering what bell hooks articulated as the "oppositional gaze." Especially considering the historical context, this is fairly revolutionary for a successful commercial film produced under the auspices of Hollywood. Hence, young, inner-city African-American audiences dominating the youth market profited from Hollywood's financial reorientation while strengthening the own community's political awareness at the same time, and so it becomes clear that *Blacula* appropriated the horror genre and profited from the cinema industry's malaise as a means to its own end. *Blacula*'s representation(s) of blackness, its emphasis on Pan-African and African-American heritage as well as the legacy of slavery allows for an effective revision of the hegemonic boundaries of humanity. By confronting audiences with these narratives, borders are redrawn and expanded to include a marginalized racial community while highlighting the same community's forgotten history. *Blacula* challenged Hollywood's "racial gaze" and encouraged young black urban audiences to engage in societal critique focused on black experience in urban America while setting the stage for a new, *proud* sense of black identity. All of this indicates increasing race consciousness and the mobilization of new cultural strategies in redefining the "Self." Indeed, popular culture should not only be considered as a "mirror of society," but, as a powerful cultural product that allows resistance in a society coming to terms with its racist legacy.

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BIOGRAPHY

Laura Isherwood is a cultural historian and lecturer at Utrecht University where she teaches courses such as *World History* and *The History of Racism*. Her main research interests include cultural history, African-American history, slavery, representation, and memory.