

Campy Representation of Blacks in Blaxploitation Films

Rabia Shahbaz

PhD English Literature Scholar, Foundation University Islamabad

Amer Akhtar

Professor, A/Dean Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Foundation University Islamabad

Rida Rehman

PhD English Literature Scholar, Lecturer, Foundation University Islamabad

Keywords

- Camp
- Blackness
- Blaxploitation
- Character
- Camp aesthetic
- Race

Abstract

As a postmodern aesthetic, Camp thrives on glamour, excess, and artifice, using these qualities both to resist and to reinforce dominant discourses. With its affinity for the obscene, the marginalized, and the rejected, Camp has long served as a site of ideological negotiation. While previous scholarship has explored its political dimensions in relation to gender and sexuality, this article examines the Campy representations of Blackness in Shaft, Superfly, Training Day, and American Gangster. It investigates how mainstream cinema deploys Camp aesthetics of excess to stereotype, commodify, or distort the image of the Black "Other." Using Sonja Foss's framework of visual rhetoric, the study analyzes how Camp operates as a visual and rhetorical strategy within Blaxploitation and crime films to shape the perception of Black identity and masculinity.

1. Introduction

The representation of Blackness in American cinema has always been mediated through style, performance, and spectacle. From the rise of Blaxploitation films in the 1970s to contemporary crime dramas, visual excess and stylized

portrayals have played a central role in shaping how Black masculinity and identity are perceived on screen. Blaxploitation cinema emerged as a cultural response to Hollywood's long history of racial marginalization, attempting to reclaim the Black image through independent power and visual assertiveness. Yet, this reclamation often relies on exaggeration and hyper-stylization, elements that blur the line between empowerment and caricature. The exaggerated visual and performative dimensions that define Blaxploitation films such as *Shaft* and *Superfly* intersect significantly with what Susan Sontag and subsequent scholars have theorized as Camp aesthetics.

This study explores how Camp, with its reliance on excess, artifice, and performance, operates within cinematic representations of Blackness. It investigates how Blaxploitation and later crime films—*Training Day* and *American Gangster*—deploy Camp aesthetics to both challenge and reinforce stereotypes about race, masculinity, and power. While Camp has traditionally been discussed in relation to gender and sexuality, particularly in queer and feminist contexts, its intersection with Blackness and racial discourse remains underexamined. By situating Camp within the framework of Blaxploitation, this article examines how exaggerated stylization, theatricality, and excess are used to construct and commodify Black identity in American cinema.

1.1 Aim of the Study

The present study attempts to discuss the political nature of Camp through the intersection of race, Blaxploitation, and blackness to contribute to the debate on the contribution of campiness towards the construction and commodification of Black identity in Hollywood cinema.

1.2 Research Questions

1. What Camp characteristics are employed in the representation of Blacks in the selected films?
2. What attributes are assigned to the Black characters through Camp portrayal?
3. What role does Camp play in constructing Blackness in the selected films?

1.3 The Intersection of Camp, Blackness and Blaxploitation

Susan Sontag is one of the first scholars who endeavored to theorize Camp as an aesthetic in her seminal essay *Notes on Camp* (2018). She establishes Camp as a sensibility, an ability distinct from an idea, that has the potential to forge something with non-normative appeal rather than mass appeal. Since this sensibility is not natural, one has to contrive it. Artifice is the second characteristic of Camp aesthetic, which complements contrivance. Camp aesthetic relies on exaggeration and excess as something that is built into its very strategy. The foundation of this aesthetic lies in artificiality, which, as Sontag notes, takes on a double meaning: “It is not the familiar split-level construction of meaning on the one hand and a symbolic meaning on the other. It is the difference, rather, between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice” (1).

Dissimulation, innate to artificiality, resides in the aesthetics of Camp, but this duplicity is not malicious or sinister in nature. It is, as Sontag writes, “festive, vitalizing, typically affectionately nostalgic and intensely experiential; behind the straight public sense in which something can be taken, one has found a private zany experience of thing” (45). Sontag describes it as a mode of aestheticism, “a way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon,” not in terms of beauty but in terms of stylization (1). Its most recognizable virtue is its “visual stylistic dimension”, outrageous and over the top to such an extent that it renders itself a spectacle. There is a passionate, exuberant quality to the extravagant aesthetic of Camp, as captured in the statement, “It’s too much, which means it’s just right” (32).

Sontag points out Camp's relation to the serious, asserting that “Camp cannot be serious because it is too much” (26). Camp “dethrones the serious” precisely because it is playful and anti-serious. The performative nature of Camp has a “stagey feel,” a “definite performative edge in presenting things in a way that they are not” (Shugart and Waggoner, 2008, p. 152). Camp's performative dimensions, therefore, “epitomize the metaphor of life as theater and being as playing a role” (Sontag, 2018, p. 53).

Sontag's attempt to elaborate on Camp as an aesthetic led to critical debates on its ideological implications. Because Camp relies on excess, artifice, and artificiality, it becomes “apolitical” (2). Sontag's view of Camp as depoliticized provoked responses from later scholars like Moe Meyer, who defined Camp as “the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity, with enactment defined as the production of social visibility”

(2). Mark Booth similarly emphasizes its performative aspect, arguing that Camp “subverts conventional morality not just with epigrams and persiflage but with whole Camp performance” (1983, p. 58).

This ideological turn makes Camp a powerful tool to resist or perpetuate dominant ideology. The political thrust of Camp aesthetics lies in its violative behavior toward societal norms. As Sontag explains, Camp “contains a large element of artifice,” defined by its “love for the exaggerated, the ‘off’, of things-being-what-they-are-not” (2018, p. 7). Scholars like Katrin Horn (2017) and Shugart and Waggoner (2008) further explore Camp’s potential to transgress conventions of gender and sexuality, while also warning of its appropriation by mainstream media.

In light of these debates, this article situates Camp within the aesthetic and ideological fabric of Blaxploitation and its successors. While scholarship has largely confined Camp to discussions of gender and sexuality, introducing categories like pop Camp, gay Camp, lesbian Camp, and feminist Camp (Robertson, 1996), this study explores the underexplored relationship between Camp and Blackness. It argues that in films such as *Shaft*, *Superfly*, *Training Day*, and *American Gangster*, Camp aesthetics serve both as a mode of stylization and a means of commodifying racial identity. By examining this intersection, the article seeks to uncover how Camp’s excess, theatricality, and performative artifice function as ideological strategies that both construct and confine Blackness within American visual culture.

1.4 Blackness

The idea of Blackness in this article will function to define the visibility of the Black body as a social construct; and the expression of Black culture in a way that strengthens the hegemony of White culture. “White Americans construct Blackness” (Johnson, 2003, p. no. 3). This social construct aids in perpetuating Whiteness as inherently superior to Blackness. Blacks find it hard to function in a white-dominated society that judges them on the basis of their color and culture. “Race as a constitutive, cultural fiction has always been a consequential element of American history and social life, and anti-Black racism, white supremacy, and the Racial Contract are foundational and systemic features of American life” (Gillispie, 2016, p.no. 43). The discursive media practices play a vital role in keeping the Blacks marginalized and socially alienated. Thus, working their way to perpetuate the ideology of racism.

The cinematic representation of Blacks in mainstream films tends to focus on their skin color, hair, and distinct facial features to mark their separation from the rest of the cast. The representation is significant because it always keeps Whiteness standing in opposition to Blackness. The depiction of slaves and slavery was “a part of the broad cultural hegemony structured into the fabric of dominant cinema at all levels, its production and content over determined by Hollywood’s profit-making strategies” (Guerrero, 2012, p. no. 25). This made-up quality and the projection of the idea of Blackness is scrutinized through the exaggerated Camp aesthetics in the backdrop of the selected films from the Blaxploitation film genre.

The “blackness” of African Americans has been treated as something “queer” in the heteronormative structures; and the term “queer” here, does not imply what it implies in the Queer theory, nor this article is interested in discussing the sexual orientation of Blacks in terms of gender. The aim of this article is to move away from Queer theory to study the politics of Camp aesthetics to perpetuate the racist ideology; through campy representations of the African American culture, the Black vernacular, the ghettos, the black bodily images, the drug addiction, and the violence of the black gangsters as represented in the mainstream media, and it can be a new site to study the ideological implications of Camp aesthetics.

1.4 Blaxploitation

Blaxploitation films are defined as movies made between 1970 and 1975, by both Black and white film directors alike, to exploit the black film audience (Lawrence, 2007, p. no. 29). The Blaxploitation film genre emerged in the 1970s, with the intention of producing films for Blacks to exploit the Black audience (Lawrence, 2007, p. no. 29). The aim being high, Blaxploitation films attempt to change the representation of Blacks on screen. The films leave the audience awestruck, as never before the Black men and women appeared on screen the way they were presented in Blaxploitation films. Blaxploitation films actually transcend generic boundaries (Clark, 2013). Clark’s assertion illustrates that utilizing the term Blaxploitation as an all-encompassing label is reductionist because the films were made across a number of genres. The films like *Shaft* (1971) *Superfly* (1972) *Training Day* (2001) and *American*

Gangster (2007) were produced with an intention to give voice to the Blacks and to present Black culture on screen in its true colors. Nonetheless, the films are critically acclaimed, and Black audiences look forward to these films with enthusiasm as featuring Blackness as it is.

The features of Blaxploitation are well defined, but Clark's assessment of Blaxploitation genre problematizes the use of the term to categories all the films made during 70s', and it helps organize the design of this study (Clark, 2013, p. no. 42). As this film genre knows no boundaries, each new film can be studied as a variation or an addition to the existing generic corpus. That's why Blaxploitation must be studied something different from the existing film genres while at the same time adding something to the traditional Hollywood films.

2. Research Methodology

This study employs Sonja Foss's visual rhetoric analysis as its methodological framework to examine how visuals communicate meaning more effectively than verbal messages. Foss defines visual rhetoric as "the study of visual imagery within the discipline of rhetoric," (Foss, 2004, p.no. 05) encompassing visual literacy as the ability to read the underlying meanings of images and understand the creative choices, color, form, and composition, that shape communication. Visual rhetoric views artifacts such as paintings, sculptures, or films as consciously designed symbols that rely on human intervention and are presented for communicative purposes. According to Foss, rhetorical scholars analyze the nature, function, and evaluation of such artifacts to understand how they construct meaning: the nature refers to the literal components of the image, the function to the emotional or persuasive response it seeks to evoke, and the evaluation to how effectively it achieves this purpose. In this research, films are selected as visual artifacts due to their cultural richness and evolving meanings over time. As complex cultural texts, films reflect and refract the societies from which they emerge, continually generating new interpretations. Their layered, symbolic, and affective dimensions make them ideal for developing a visual rhetorical framework that deepens rhetorical awareness and analytical insight.

3. Campy Games in *Shaft*, *Superfly*, *Training Day* and *American Gangster*

Camp aesthetic is easily recognizable, by virtue of its "visual stylistic dimensions", and because there is a passionate, exuberant quality to the extravagant aesthetics of Camp as captured in the statement, "it's too much, which means it's just right" (Sontag, 2018, p. no. 23). Following the fashion trends of the 1970s, John *Shaft* opts for a heavier, yet tidier mustache and Priest goes for Horseshoe mustache and mutton chop sideburns. This excessively ostentatious feature gives a striking feel to Black protagonist who is concerned about the rugged display of overt masculinity. The showy mustaches and sideburns sponsor playfulness and connote several meanings about the bearer. These features over-emphasize the appearance of Black heroes when on screen, even more than their characterization. The exaggerated styling and funky looks leave no room for the audience to reflect upon the masculinity or heroism of a Black hero rather the ostentatious stylization goes against the grain of Blaxploitation which intended to depict a socially and politically independent powerful hero (Diawara, 2012, p. no. 16).

No matter how religiously Young Blood Priest follows the 70s' mustache and sideburns or John *Shaft's* obsession for his appearance and style, he will remain a Black. Irrespective of what fashion he takes up, his Afro hair always reminds the audience of his Blackness. The Blaxploitation film genre intended to project their own image of "Blackness", an image that must be wholly independent of Hollywood projections of Blackness. The Campy extravagance of mustache and sideburns makes them a part of spatial narrative where the black characters must have been the part of spatial narration. This contained the attributes of Blacks to mere looks and appearances, establishing that Blacks are nothing more than the outrageous display of playfulness through mustaches and sideburns.

The audience is introduced with a tall man striding down the streets with extreme confidence in the opening scene of *Shaft*. John *Shaft* appears on the screen all snug and comfy in his tweed coat, turtleneck and sports jacket with exaggerated lapels. He is obsessed with leather which is reflected time and again in his belt and cuffs which give a gaudy touch to a nude and plain outfit. The aesthetic of Camp is reflected in an elaborate, over the top use of leather and detailed dressing, as, "Camp is art that is "too much", the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the

passionate and the naïve”. Detective *Shaft* maintains his campy looks while relying on beiges and browns and large scaled combos of blues and blacks. Stella Bruzzi (2012) writes, “*Shaft*s wardrobe represents his equivocal social position, simultaneously comfortable in the white dominated establishment (see for instance, his sharp tweed suits) and the Black dominated urban street” (400). The stylized Afro look of John Shaft and Campy exaggeration personified over-the-top use of colors ends in narcissism. The Camp aesthetics employed in stylization of both Afros, contribute to creating an image of Blackness obsessed with the desire to merge in the mainstream. The overtly narcissist attitude of both the protagonists is in fact a compulsion to adopt Americana, to get recognition as a civilized man.

The Young Blood priest chooses a funk style based on boho patterns and paisley prints for the swishing maxi coats, floor length overcoats and trendy jackets. The sharp edged felt hat and snap brimmed hats gives Priest an air of “excessive clothes horse” revealing his obsession for style and clothing. The costume functions as the important signifier, that transfers to the spectacular, the success and desirability of the protagonists who wear them (Bruzzi, 2012, p. no. 109). It is primarily the gaudy clothing which introduces the Pusher Man to its audience. The conspicuous consumption of garish combinations and rapidly changing outfits best matches the affluence of the drug dealer who can afford the luxuries of life. The outrageous display of gaudy clothes is one way to use Camp aesthetics to show off Blackness.

The incongruous desires of Black males to display masculinity through mustaches is questioned through the desire to look spick and span. It is a common assumption that males do not care about their appearances but in case of Blacks in the film, the overtly narcissistic behavior projects a gender subversion for Black males. Once again like *Shaft*, clothes in *Superfly* put up a show in the film even more than the person who wears them. *Superfly* becomes a costume film when flashy ensembles come in the way to narrative progression and other thematic concerns. The campy clothing not only makes Black males distinct but reduces them to mere caricature of Blackness. The exotic stylization results in depicting Blackness as something vain because authentic masculinity does not depend on clothing and style. The extreme reliance of Black males on fashion and clothing signify that Blackness has nothing to hook upon except fashion and clothes.

The ultimate gangster looks bestowed to Denzel Washington in *Training Day* and *American Gangster* is stylized and exaggerated to the extent of making it exclusively Camp. Unlike movies like *The Equalizer* and *Inner City* where Denzel Washington is hardly recognizable because of his baldness and bulky appearance; *Training Day* and *The American Gangster* improvise the Denzelness of Denzel Washington, making him easily recognizable as quintessential Denzel. The appearances are contrived for the Black male so much so that the appearance alone can bring him near Italian, Irish or Cuban gangster. “These men become gangster when they look like gangster. The need to conform to the already established looks of a gangster that must be identifiable for the audience is distilled into devices like nicknames, shadows, silhouettes and most importantly styled to excess” (Bruzzi 94). The smoking habit of Alonzo Harris goes to extreme, his tattoos are stylized through leisurely long shots, making Alonzo instantly identifiable with Leo; the Hollywood gangster of *Millers’ Crossing*.

What actually sparks up the flashy ensemble of Alonzo Harris is the excessive use of metal and the gaudy sheen of all black dress. While flaunting an oversized metallic pendant, Alonzo makes an attempt to defy the conventional uniformed look of narcotic cops and most importantly he ridicules the cross signed pendant and its significance. The way it loosely hangs from his neck shows how lightly he takes his religion and moral values. The ethics of the Black cop are no more than the flashy show of metallic pendant. The defiance makes him vain, the vanity in man signifies “evil and degeneracy” (Bruzzi 92). This vanity overshadows the true essence of Blackness, making the point the Blacks lack the capacity to conform or blend with in the crowd.

Sontag acknowledges that “history of Camp taste is part of the history of snob taste” (56). This is particularly important about the Camp aesthetics in *American Gangster* contrives an over-the-top professional look for Frank Lucas, coupled with the stylized look of a dedicated drug lord who lives by the philosophy which says, “the loudest one is the weakest one in the room” (*American Gangster* 1.45-2.05). So many screen gangsters invite comments about their appearance, show themselves off, and are obsessively consumed by their own image (McArthur 76). The *American Gangster* swindles into an infinite number of seasonal fads. The obsession for clothing goes unchecked when the drug lord changes 64 costumes within the time limit of 2 hours and 55minutes.

The exaggerated stylization enhances vanity, projecting them as somebody who stands apart from the community. Here Camp aesthetics do more harm than good by reducing Blackness to mere vanity that signifies evil and degeneracy. Thus, associating negativity with Blackness. The extravagantly opted fashion and style by American gangster and the narcotic cop makes him one of a kind for the audience; and the film wants to make them believe that Blackness with all its pretense is superficial with nothing extraordinary to boast about but crime and perversion.

Sontag makes an assertion about Camps' association with artifice rather than the natural. It revels in artifice because a double meaning of things is always possible but "it is not the familiar split-level construction of a literal meaning on the one hand and a symbolic meaning, on the other. It is the difference between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice". Early in the essay Sontag makes an assertion about Camps' location in artifice rather than in the natural. She observes that Camp is a quality discoverable in objects and the behavior of persons (Sontag, 2018, p. no. 54) and that the way of Camp is not in terms of beauty... but in terms of the degree of artifice, in terms of stylization (55). On the basis of these assertions, the study suggests that Camp not only lies in characters, but the made-up plots and the use of gaudy props and elaborate use of camera angles can be an extension in Camp aesthetics.

The spirit of extravagance is the hallmark of the Camp. The essence of Camp is the love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration. Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style – but a particular kind of style. It is the love of exaggerations (8). When it comes to the Campy representations of Blacks in *Shaft* and *Superfly*, the films rely on exaggerated camera angles and long shots for the depiction of Blacks' urban space, their attire, drug consumption and violent nature of Blacks. The slow downward movement of camera in the opening scene of *Shaft* works to give reverence to the lone detective in a way trying to create an image for *Shaft* as larger than life persona. The plot of the film *Shaft* is all made up, as it creates a larger-than-life persona for detective *Shaft*, bestowing him a lot of physical strength paired with deductive reasoning. The ostentatious display of guns and power contributes to outwit any other character in the film. The slow camera movement that pans over *Shaft* in the very first scene accentuates his clothing and thus contributes to conveying the stylized look of the detective.

The films employ movement in long shots to talk about the whereabouts of John Shaft and Young Blood Priest. The unusually long walks of John Shaft in the streets and Priests' drive in his Cadillac towards uptown gives an opportunity to the audience to witness the Black urban space which is downtrodden and unkempt. The long shots, which last for almost 3 minutes, highlight the Harlem streets brimming with dirt, filth, and crime. The exaggerated long shots have been used to depict Harlem as a place for drug trafficking and drug junkies, and high angle long shots in the opening scene of *Superfly* conspire to project ghettos as a residing place for robbers. All these exaggerated camera angles are used to bring home the point that the Black world is a place for muggers and drug hustlers. The excessive use of zoom and prolonged movements in both the films reinforce the stereotypical images associated with Black urban space, that it lacks vigor and energy; it is bleak and dilapidated. The quick montages are bent upon providing every uncensored minor detail of the ghettos by offering a voyeuristic pleasure to the audience unfamiliar with the ghettos and a sense of identification for those familiar with it. Hence, the films commodify Black culture to increase the demand in the market.

The film *Shaft* overplays sex right from the opening credits to the intimate sexual scenes of John Shaft with his white and Black girl friend. The extreme long shot in *Shaft* focuses on the black bodies indulged in sexual pleasure, thus focusing on black sexuality. *Superfly* retains this exaggeration by screening a frontal nude image of the Black male body, sex in a bubble bath when mirrors accentuate the curves of entwined black bodies. According to Sontag "Camp is the attempt to do something extraordinary. But extraordinary in the sense, often, of being special, glamorous. (The curved line, extravagant gestures). Not extraordinary merely in the sense of effort" (28). The explicit sexual scenes in the film *Shaft* and *Superfly* offer a panorama of Black bodies available for consumption on the screen.

Exaggeration being the basic tenet of Camp aesthetics is overpitched in the films to create an "oversexed" image for John Shaft and makes Young Blood Priest a "Pusher man". Black onscreen male is sexually obsessed is the recurrent image which the films perpetuate in the media. The film destroys every menial effort of Blacks to counter the sexually impotent image of Blacks, while focusing on the portrayal of Black sexuality as hypersexual or sex brutes. Both films go overboard to deliberately subvert the sexuality of Black males as *Shaft* patently creates slip ups through subverting gender roles. The sexual vignettes in *Shaft* subvert the Black male sexuality by assigning the detective a role of

comforter which associate most with a female. Thus, all efforts remain a repressed discourse because the sexual images lack modesty as depicted in *Superfly*, make Black male body available for gaze. The Black male body is exposed to the gaze of the spectators, “the racial inconsistencies of the exposure and depiction of black male bodies is tied to the inherent dehumanization of the Black man in the society” (Diawara, 2012, p. no. 56).

Alonzo Harris exudes an unchecked sexual desire that ultimately bestows him a volcanic identity. The bestial sexuality is impossible to contain even if it makes Jake uneasy. His spontaneous kisses to his mistress which create a kind of disgust in Jake. Above all the use of explicit sexual language throughout the film accentuates his identity as a hypersexual Black detective. His ogling tendency frames Alonzo as a Black man having pathologized masculinity and robust sexuality. The instance where he ogles two women and relies on filthy language to exert his masculine power over the two women, “I will lock you up, I will give you ten kids” (*Training Day* 1.07- 1.55) puts a stash over his bestial nature.

The widely recognized “Sydney Poitier Syndrome” revealing a good boy in a totally white world, with no wife, no sweetheart, no woman to love or kiss, helping white man to solve the Whiteman’s’ problem” (Gurrero 789) starts to crumble and gives birth to Black machismo “portraying the sexexploitative, aggressive Black macho image, served up for consumption by young Black audience” (978). The films manipulate camp aesthetics to screen Blackness through instances of graphic language and explicit sexual titillations. Exaggeration being the hallmark of Camp aesthetics supersedes to present Black male on screen as “sex machine”, where a priest is presented as a “Pusher Man” with no moral inhibitions. A detective cop strengthens the image of Black male as a man with erotic sexuality; this image makes him a mere caricature; a sexual beast who lacks any romanticize relationship with his mistress. All the Black males have been presented as automated sexual beings with no respect for women but fulfilling their carnal desires as animals. Camp aesthetics pull up to present Black sexuality as something that functions as an arraignment of their wild nature.

Superfly works meticulously to present every detail of drug distribution and consumption in the alleys of Harlem. The frequent use of montage assists the director to pack a lot of information about the drug junkies and drug dealers involved in the business. The highly stylized nature of Camp has a “stagey feel”, which one can sense in the protagonist of *Superfly*, as Young Blood Priest tries to outnumber other drug lords in the film through an outrageous display of money showcased through his gaudy clothing, customized Cadillac and over the top interiors of his house. Although the film depicts drug being consumed by every stratum of society, but Blacks being the main source of its production and distribution have been over emphasized through montages. The cocaine snorting hero snorts generously and his excessive consumption of drugs presented on the screen relies on Camp aesthetics to represent Blacks as drug traffickers and drug junkies. The thrill of cocaine usage is put into words in the title song of *Superfly*, “I’ve gotta Jones/running through my bones”. The films relied on the exhaustive premise of drugs and drug hustlers to increase the market value of the films.

The four-minute photo montage packs a lot of drug processing and assembling in the film *American Gangster* to enhance the pleasure and excitement of drug usage and distribution in Blacks. The photo montage encapsulates some sign and symbols of the pleasurable drug consumption by whites and Blacks thus presenting Blacks as the main provider of drugs (*American Gangster* 1.07-2.55). Ridley Scot packs as much as he can in the small shots making heroin smuggling, drug lords and drug junkies the focus of the plot. The camera pans unusually close when needles cringe into black bodies; Blacks look weird snorting cocaine and waiting impatiently to get high at the over dosage of Blue Magic. *Training Day* does not drift a lot when it comes to extreme close-ups and askew angles to present the narcotic Black cop and his evil mind games. The camera zooms in and out to show the gears churning in Alonzo’s head. The wide camera angle emphasizes the sitting posture of the boss at ease and all powerful in his own space, condescending, cynical, and loves to patronize. The camera movement from angled to medium shots builds the momentum of Alonzo’s evil plans, his sadistic attitude, and the way he extends violence towards Jake. The full figure framing helps exaggerate the effect of violence in *Training Day*; thus, aggravating the effect of violence particularly in relation to Black man.

For Gurrero “Blacks have given themselves immersed in dominant cinema ideology locked into such a prison of distorted symbols and images that the very attempt to extricate ourselves only leads to more confusion” (Guerrero,

2012, p. no. 90). Blaxploitation is no different from any other genre of Hollywood when it comes to the representation of Blacks in films.

Shaft and *Superfly* present a 1970s' version of violence. The audience does not witness the graphic representation of violence on the screen in the form of blood gushing out of the wounds or dead bodies, there are no gunshots screened explicitly in these films, nor we can find any explicit representation of torturous bodies as in *Reservoir Dogs*. The killings are discreetly conveyed by approaching an abstract approach to violence. This kind of violence looks absurd in contemporary times when a street brawl starts abruptly, and fistfight lasts for 5 long minutes in *Superfly*. The humdrum of background sounds aggravates the absurdity of street brawls, "insulated within reactionary plots, wielded by cartoonish, quip sprouting heroes and fueled by rock music soundtracks and eye boggling special effects" (Kendrick, 2009, p. no. 102). The films go over the top using the old premise of violence to increase the viewership of the films. A superficial stylized depiction of violence is another strategy of the mainstream media to use Camp to commodify Blackness. Thus, giving an image that a black hero lacks vigor and vitality to fight like a white hero and even when he fights, the fight gives comic relief to the audience. Another implication to present such laughable violent scenes is to prove that Blacks lack the sense of presenting visually aesthetic violence on screen and eventually come up with farcical violence.

The graphic violence in *American Gangster* is exaggerated to the level of Camp. The aestheticized campy violence is hard to stomach when it comes to heartless killings on the street, blood gushing out of the wounds, and reaches off limits when the gangster pour gasoline and sets a man ablaze (*American Gangster* 1.45 2.55). The extensive stylistic elaboration of violence becomes a spectacle when a man was shot dead by three bullets in the name of revenge killing. Violence that smacked of sadism, fights that involve choking or kicking, extreme forms of torture and scenes that show the response to that violence (Prince 40), dominates *Training Day*, as the savagery of Alonzo Harris goes out of control.

The film presents an over-the-top aesthetic, "the art of 20th century, that is art whose goal is not that of creating harmonies, but of overstraining the medium and introducing more and more violent, and unresolvable subject matter" (Sontag 36). The intensity of graphic violence goes out of bounds when Alonzo choked a junkie almost dead by inserting a pen in his throat (*Training Day* 1.16-2.07). The hot-headed cop and his violent behavior cause fear and dread in the audience when confronting with the multitudinous images of blood and gore and the rampant images of man biting another man, killings in front of innocent child. This all suggests that Black man is least bothered about his relationships and never cares to think that the unbridled violence is consuming his relationships. This exaggerated violence projects Blackness as violent, brutal and heartless scoundrels.

The selected Blaxploitation films project stylized violence to aid narrative progression. The rise and fall of the gangsters and the detective in all the films depend on the Black male action and plans and they are bound to fall if act against the White man; meaning there by their services must facilitate whites only then the violence is justified otherwise they appear as feral on the screen. Graphic violence when coupled with explicit language has a knockdown effect on the audience. The poignant physicality of the Blacks' campy violence is enough to "other" them as gangsters in the mainstream media. The black soul that inhabits the black body is shown perverted to the extent of enjoying the moment of death as a spectacle. This portrays a horrific picture of Black males as heartless and sinister kind ever born on earth.

Sontag makes an assertion about Camps' association with artifice rather than natural. It revels in artifice because a double meaning of things is always possible but "it is not the familiar split-level construction of a literal meaning on the one hand and a symbolic meaning, on the other. It is the difference rather between the thing as meaning something, anything and the thing as pure artifice" (34). Early in the essay Sontag makes an assertion about Camps' location in artifice rather than in natural. She observes that Camp is a quality discoverable in objects and the behavior of persons (54) and that the way of Camp is not in terms of beauty... but in terms of the degree of artifice, in terms of stylization (28). On the basis of these assertions the study suggests that Camp not only lies in characters, but the made-up plots and the use of gaudy props can be an extension in Camp aesthetics.

The *Young Blood Priest* uses crucifix in the most flamboyant way to lick and snort drugs. This weird use of cross sign ridicules his name of Priest and at the same time puts a question mark on the morality of Black hero making fun of the revered sign itself. The exaggerated use of props goes to the extent of using oversized chrome lights, side mounds,

and the patterned vertical grill in the customized Cadillac. These gaudy exaggerations try to assert that Priest has no other way to establish his identity but through overt display of wealth and affluence. The edgy and muscular Chevy Monte Carlo establishes the same thing for Alonzo Harris; the exaggeratedly modified car overturns the meaning of the car which was once considered an icon of style, taste and elegance. The bold frontal restyling, customized sunroof, flow master exhaust and hydraulics have an ostentatious appeal for the onlooker. The Dayton tires with Bullet caps bestow it a notorious look as if the car becomes a partner in crime with the Black narcotic cop. The outrageous sound, brisk movements and volatile speed contribute to the narrative progression and goes parallel with the mood swings of the detective cop, Alonzo Harris. The car of substance gives an impression of the two cars in one; having the tendency of embracing every notoriety within itself be it drugs or illegal money and weapons.

Similarly, various settings in the film *Shaft*, highlight the gaudy décor of Black living as in tiffany lamps in the house of *Shaft's* girlfriend, the floral patterns in the curtains and the sewerage pipes catch the attention of the viewer going through the middle of *Shaft's* office. The use of all these gaudy props establishes the fact that Blacks lack any refinement of taste, and no matter what, they cannot harness their aesthetic tendencies towards sophistication. The over-the-top décor leaves the audience with awe, instigating an opinion about Blacks who can rely only on exaggeration to assert themselves. *Superfly* gives life and tenacity to the otherwise dead alleys of Harlem. The restaurants uptown and their interiors are given special attention with the intention of presenting the taste and life of Blacks in Harlem. The disco bars and Priests' house is altogether different from the dilapidated streets of Harlem. The settings in *American Gangster* offer an opportunity to witness the artifice of Camp aesthetics thoroughly. The ostentatious ornamentation of elite restaurants, dance clubs and health clubs offers an opportunity for the audience to witness Blackness as something other than the run-down workplaces and dirty slums. This time black gangsters flaunt their wealth through swanky white empires which have an air of affluence.

The ghettos which are considered as the epicenter of Black culture and are always shown as a place of downtrodden in films are given a new meaning in *Superfly* through Camp aesthetics. The penthouse says out loud about the luxurious life of a black cocaine dealer, but the point is made through Camp aesthetics which suggests that money cannot change the tacky taste of Blacks. The ways things are literally thrown away in the penthouse suggests that YoungBlood Priest can afford the expensive sculptures but cannot even borrow the sense of placement. The sheer difference between the outside and the gaudy interiors gives the idea that Blacks can only enjoy luxury through unfair means. A bootlegging business is a must if they need to get over the dumpsites of Harlem.

The ghettos or the Black city space is given so much importance in films that the ghettos become a character itself. The interiors and exteriors where Blacks reside are overemphasized to highlight the culture and precisely Blackness. This Blackness is commodified through the artifice of Camp aesthetics. Blaxploitation films work no different from mainstream Hollywood films in depicting exaggerated pictures of Harlem slums and alleys. The films are obsessed with depicting every minor detail of Black living, and probably that's the reason why the cityscape, the ghettos and the Black urban spaces constitute the spatial narration of the films. The black spaces emphasize dirt, filth, poverty and degradation, in a way revealing the inferior nature of their inhabitants, i.e. Blacks.

The "Urban films" is the euphemism for representation of Blacks who occupy the inner city which means ghettos and ghetto means Blacks. The trips offer a voyeuristic pleasure to the audience unfamiliar with the ghettos and a kind of identification for those familiar with them. The city enables events so much so that it becomes a character itself (Massood, 2011, p. no. 567). This one-dimensional picture of Black urban spaces featured in *Shaft* and *Superfly* reinforces the stereotypical images shown in mainstream Hollywood films. Yvonne. D. Sims calls them a non-realistic representation of Harlem, the images that do not pose challenge for the audience to accept the nuanced and complex Blackness presented on American screens (89).

The bleak picture of excessive drug consumption and violence in these films makes the Blaxploitation genre controversial. Contrary to their assertion of giving voice and true representation to Blacks, they portrayed Blacks as coldblooded brutes. To increase the visuality of the films on the box office, the films distorted the black culture through artifice; thus, commodified Blackness by using Camp aesthetics strategically.

The detective *Shaft* and his all made up character prepare the audience to watch for a Black hero who is sexually potent, has some invincible strength and remarkable deductive reasoning. The plot bends upon showing the hyper masculinity of the detective, "he maintains his position as an individualist, in keeping with Hollywood's repression or

containment of the collective” (Gurrero 897). The individuality which Shaft tries to maintain amongst the burglars and the mafia gangsters becomes ‘stagey’ and sort of farcical. This comes with the revelation that Shaft lacks real power when confronted with whites. He has to go by the books when helping Blacks and should mainly work to support the whites otherwise the license for his job can be confiscated. The composed and confident face of a detective that he is holding up, becomes only an image when in sexual vignettes he takes up the role of a comforter and nurturer. The Camp aesthetics give it a stagey feel in order to tone down the expanse of Blackness.

The *American Gangster*, creates an over-the-top persona for the gangsta; Frank Lucas. The fictitious world created for Frank Lucas goes over the board to present the real life of the drug lord Frank Lucas. An extremely refined and cultured man with excessive mannerism is essential to glorify the downfall of the gangster who commits sins with bravado. He illuminates the life of a gangster, “who escapes from obscurity to wealth, power and fame” by using corporate strategies to “organize or perish” (Gardaphe 678). Sontag says, “Camp is the glorification of character” (32). The “Camp eye appreciates the unity, the force of the person”, the character of American Gangster is unrealistically exalted in *American Gangster* in an effort to show the grandeur of his downfall. Frank Lucas character is commendable as a businessman, but that upright Black businessman is a threat to White power and Richie; who is of the opinion that with his imprisonment “things can return to normal” (*American Gangster* 1.75 2.55). There exist real gangsters, but this Gangster is primarily a creation of imagination. The real city produces criminals; the imaginary city produces gangsters; he is what we want to be and what we are afraid we may become” (Gardaphe 89).

Camp is the triumph of epicene style, says Sontag in her notes. She further elaborates that all styles that are artifice are ultimately epicene. The convertibility of man and woman, person and things are epicene (34). The Camp aesthetics in *American Gangster* bends upon presenting a gangsta having some feminine qualities; extreme mannerism, tidiness, detailing in clothing and impeccable presentation of things give him a feminine quality. Things get weird on Lucas' side when he gets annoyed at the Alpaca rug being stained by his brother. He even knows all the tips and tricks of a woman to get rid of the stain. Here Camp taste draws on a mostly unacknowledged truth of taste. What is most beautiful in most virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine (Sontag 11). This is necessary to bring down the impact factor of Black bootlegger and present Blackness as epicene. The racial attitude of Camp aesthetics in this particular Blaxploitation film is enough to taint Blackness as something not pure in its crude form.

To create a larger-than-life figure, *Training Day* opts artifice as part of Camp aesthetic to portray a tough guy as narcotic cop. Apparently, Alonzo is a stereotypical hard-core cop but in actual he is anything but stereotypical. The narcotic cop takes things on his way or highway. The narcissist attitude of the Black cop enjoys violence. The film tactfully uses Camp aesthetic to rebrand Blackness into something that revels injustice; his version of law supports street justice. Thus, it not only signifies evil but the capacity of Blackness to corrupt anything around as Alonzo tries to bring Jake in his evil plans.

The Priest is ironically presented as drug lord lacking moral values to the extent of degradation and even when a black man is detective like John Shaft, he lacks power and is obliged to work under the constant surveillance of white man. The exaggerated stylization and obsession with clothes feature Black heroes as vain; puts a question mark on their masculinity and makes them overly narcissistic. The over-the-top interiors, gaudy props and stylized violence perpetuates Blackness as having an erotic taste, devoid of any sophistication. These campy representations give an impression as if both the Blaxploitation films are complying with the trajectory of Hollywood films. The Camp aesthetic serves the purpose of projecting Blacks not merely distinct but reduces Blackness to superfluous vanity that signifies “evil and degeneracy” (Bruzzi, 2012, p. no. 92). Camp as an aesthetic is strategically employed in these films to commodify Blackness. The spatio temporal boundaries in the films are highlighted to divert extra attention towards the cultural differences that exist and reflect in Black spaces. This gives strength to white supremacy and bestow them some more power to overemphasize the gloom of black cityscape and the interiors.

Camp being a site of political thought and action through the performance of its aesthetics may also be a mode of resistance and raises the prospects of the black character’s campiness in the selected works as a sign of their rebellion. However, the lack of a clear moral high ground prevents me from seeing these characters as symbols of black resistance. The genre’s bias against the blacks in that Hollywood is white dominated and the genesis of the Blaxploitation era in propping up these deviant personalities as black role models, as notable Black scholar bell hooks

points out, to further the racist attitudes towards the blacks in the society. That Hollywood was propping up these figures as instances of quintessential blackness that was inherently deviant, a bad role model for the black youth to aspire towards and a cautionary tale for the whites.

4. Conclusion

Camp aesthetics, with its deliberate artifice and exaggerated style, transforms the representation of Black masculinity in Blaxploitation and contemporary crime films into a spectacle of excess. Through flamboyant fashion, stylized camera work, and heightened depictions of sex, drugs, and violence, these films commodify Blackness, reducing it to a visual performance of vanity and vice. The exaggerated moustaches, flashy clothing, and gaudy accessories that once symbolized empowerment are reconfigured into tools of caricature, stripping the Black hero of political or social depth. *Shaft*, *Superfly*, *Training Day*, and *American Gangster* deploy Camp aesthetics not to liberate but to contain, turning individuality into excess, power into spectacle, and masculinity into artifice. The overstated sensuality and violence that define these characters reinforce stereotypes of the hypersexual, narcissistic, and morally corrupt Black male. In this sense, Camp aesthetics does more harm than good: it amplifies visibility but at the cost of authenticity, transforming Blackness into a consumable image curated for mainstream gaze.

References

- Booth, M. W. (1983). *Camp*. University of Michigan Press.
- Bruzzi, S. (2012). *Undressing cinema: Clothing and identity in the movies*. Routledge.
- Clark, R. (2013). *At a theater or drive-in near you: The history, culture, and politics of the American exploitation film*. Routledge.
- Cleto, F. (Ed.). (1999). *Camp: Queer aesthetics and the performing subject: A reader*. University of Michigan Press.
- Diawara, M. (2012). *Black American cinema*. Routledge.
- Foss, S. K. (2004). Theory of visual rhetoric. In K. L. Smith, S. Moriarty, & K. K. Barbatsis (Eds.), *Handbook of visual communication: Theory, methods, and media* (pp. 141–152). Routledge.
- Fuqua, A. (Director). (2001). *Training Day* [Motion picture]. Warner Bros.
- Gardaphé, F. L. (2006). *From wiseguys to wise men: The gangster and Italian American masculinities*. Routledge.
- Gillespie, M. B. (2016). *Film blackness: American cinema and the idea of black film*. Duke University Press.
- Guerrero, E. (2012). *Framing blackness: The African American image in film*. Temple University Press.
- Horn, K. (2017). *Women, camp, and popular culture: Serious excess*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Johnson, E. P. (2003). *Appropriating blackness: Performance and the politics of authenticity*. Duke University Press.
- Kaplan, G. P., Jr. (Director). (1972). *Superfly* [Motion picture]. Warner Bros.
- Kendrick, J. (2009). *Hollywood bloodshed: Violence in 1980s American cinema*. Southern Illinois University Press.
- Lawrence, N. (2007). *Blaxploitation films of the 1970s: Blackness and genre*. Routledge.

- Massood, P. J. (2011). *Black city cinema: African American urban experiences in film*. Temple University Press.
- Meyer, M. (Ed.). (1994). *The politics and poetics of camp*. Routledge.
- Parks, G. (Director). (1971). *Shaft* [Motion picture]. MGM.
- Prince, S. (2003). *Classical film violence: Designing and regulating brutality in Hollywood cinema, 1930–1968*. Rutgers University Press.
- Robertson, P. (1996). *Guilty pleasures: Feminist camp from Mae West to Madonna*. Duke University Press.
- Scott, R. (Director). (2007). *American Gangster* [Motion picture]. Universal Pictures.
- Shugart, H. A., & Waggoner, C. E. (2008). *Making camp: Rhetoric of transgression in U.S. popular culture*. University of Alabama Press.
- Sims, Y. D. (2006). *Women of Blaxploitation: How the Black action film heroine changed American popular culture*. McFarland.
- Sontag, S. (2018). *Notes on camp*. Penguin Books.
- Walker, D., Rausch, A. J., & Watson, A. C. (2009). *Reflections on Blaxploitation: Actors and directors speak*. Scarecrow Press.

Citation of this paper

Shahbaz, R., Akhtar, A., & Rehman, R. (2025). Campy Representation of Blacks in Blaxploitation Films. *Erevna: Journal of Linguistics and Literature* 7(3), 6-18.