

EDITOR NOTE

One night, while searching for a video essay I had previously watched on YouTube, I stumbled upon a video about Blaxploitation. This video got me thinking deeply about the topic.

BLAXPLOITATION FILMS AND MEDIA


What Are Blaxploitation Films?

The term **Blaxploitation** comes from the 1970s and is a blend of “Black” and “exploitation,” emerging in response to the cultural and political shifts brought about by the **Civil Rights Movement**. It was coined by **Junius Griffin**, a civil rights activist and then-president of the Beverly Hills-Hollywood chapter of the **NAACP** (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People).

Blaxploitation films were groundbreaking in that they placed Black characters and Black communities at the center of their narratives rather than to background roles. Initially, these films were made to entertain Black audiences, counteracting racist misrepresentation, and giving rise to strong Black protagonists who fought against corrupt systems.

However, once Hollywood realized the profitability of these films, major studios began producing Blaxploitation movies not for Black audiences but for “mainstream” (predominantly white) viewers. This shift led to an increase in films that leaned heavily on negative stereotypes, prompting Junius Griffin to criticize the genre, stating that Blaxploitation was “proliferating offenses to and against the Black community by perpetuating racist stereotypes of inherent criminality.”

hed by
indicated.



Pam Grier is an iconic actress best known for her roles in 1970s blaxploitation films like *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974). Her performances as strong, independent, and fearless women made her a trailblazer for Black actresses in action films.

The Rise of BET and

Fast-forward to the launch of Black Entertainment Television (BET), a network founded to center Black voices in media. Initially, BET aired only two hours of weekly programming, with a strong focus on music. In 1988, it introduced BET News, a program dedicated to discussing issues relevant to the Black community and pop culture. By 1991, BET became the first Black-controlled television company to be listed on the New York Stock Exchange, marking a major milestone in Black media representation.



However, in modern times, many Black scholars and critics have expressed a strong dislike for BET. They argue that the network has shifted away from its original mission of uplifting and informing the Black community, instead promoting content that reinforces negative stereotypes. I agree with this criticism. The shift from empowering Black programming to stereotypical content became especially apparent in the early 2000s when most of BET's news and public affairs programs were canceled in favor of reality TV and reruns. The sale of BET to Viacom (now Paramount) also meant that it was no longer Black-owned.



Colorism in BET

One of the biggest criticisms of BET is its perpetuation of colorism. While the network claims to be making changes, the issue persists. For example, lighter-skinned women in their movies and shows often get to wear natural hairstyles, while darker-skinned women are more likely to have their hair relaxed or straightened. Additionally, casting choices often place light-skinned or racially ambiguous women as romantic leads or "successful" characters, while darker-skinned women are cast as antagonists, comedic relief, or "ghetto" stereotypes. While this trend has improved over time, it still lingers in much of Black media.



Its Controversy

BET Awards and the Restriction of Black Music

Another issue I have with BET is its award show categories. The BET Awards mainly recognize genres like Hip-Hop, R&B, and Gospel, but ignore other forms of Black music. Why is there no Jazz category, despite Jazz being one of the most historically important genres for Black Americans? Why are there no categories for Reggae, Alternative, or Classical music?

This limited scope reinforces the idea that Black artists are only prominent in certain genres, erasing the legacy of Black musicians in rock, punk, and classical music. Take Bad Brains, for example—a pioneering Black hardcore punk band.

Rock in general would not exist without Black musicians.



BAD BRAINS



Jessie Montgomery (Classical)

Fatou Samba (K POP)



Hemlock Spring (Indie Pop)

Chief xian atunde adjuah (Jazz)

Rico Nasty (Punk Rap)

Yves Jarvis (Indie Pop)

Modern Black Media in Film

While representation is still lacking, recent years have brought a wave of amazing Black films. Some standouts being *Judas and the Black Messiah* (2021), *The Woman King* (2022), Jordan Peele's horror films like *Get Out* (2017) *Us* (2019), and *Nope* (2022). Action movies like *Black Panther* and *They Cloned Tyrone*. Comedy movies like *Girls Trip* (2017).



TV shows featuring strong Black narratives



Final Thoughts

Black media has made significant strides since the Blaxploitation era, yet many of the same challenges persist. As it continues to evolve, it's essential for audiences to advocate for authentic representation, challenge harmful stereotypes, and uplift the diverse voices shaping Black creativity across all forms of entertainment.

Snowfall (2017–2023) – A crime drama, *Abbott Elementary* (2021–) mockumentary sitcom about a group of teachers and their principal at an underfunded public school (I really like the show) *Interview with the Vampire* (2022–) (is underrated)– A series I personally love, I really like its portrayal of Claudia, played by Bailey Bass in season one and Delaney Hayles in season two. (I forced my mom to watch it with me) and *The Vince Staples Show* (2024) – A unique and visually engaging comedy that captures Vince Staples' humor and storytelling style.

Modern Blaxploitation

If you're looking for modern blaxploitation films, Tubi is a great streaming platform. Since Tubi makes it relatively easy for filmmakers to upload their work, it has valuable space for Black filmmaking. Even though there has been an increase in Black representation in mainstream Hollywood—there is still work to do—Tubi provides a place where independent Black creators can showcase their work without industry gatekeepers.

On a different note, modern Blaxploitation exists in a more complicated space, particularly on platforms like YouTube. While traditional Blaxploitation films were often created by Black filmmakers and actors, today's digital era sees a new form of this phenomenon, where Black content creators play up stereotypes to game the algorithm and attract viewers. Like "Pop the Balloon" or "Find Love" are examples of this trend.

However, it's important to note that this is not representative of Black YouTube as a whole. There are plenty of amazing Black content creators. Personally, I follow a lot of Black essayists who provide in-depth discussions on media, culture, and history.



The History of Black Animation

In the early 20th century, Black characters in animation were often portrayed through harmful and racist. This was largely due to the exclusion of Black artists from major studios like

Disney and Warner Bros. Despite these barriers, Black animators began making strides in the industry.

One of the earliest pioneers was Frank Braxton, who became the first Black animator at Warner Bros. in the 1950s. He later worked for MGM and co-founded the Animation Guild, paving the way for future Black artists in the field. His contributions helped break down barriers in an industry that had long been closed off to Black creatives.

By the 1970s and 1980s, more Black artists entered the field, and representation slowly improved. A major turning point was the animated series *Fat Albert* and the... *Cosby Kids* (1972–1985), produced by Filmation. The show was one of the first to focus on Black characters in a positive light, teaching life lessons and addressing real-world issues.

The 1990s and early 2000s saw significant progress in Black animation and storytelling. Several groundbreaking shows featured like *The Proud Family* (2001–2005) – Created by Bruce W. Smith, this Disney Channel series was one of the first mainstream animated shows centered on a Black family. It addressed themes of race, friendship, and identity. *Static Shock* (2000–2004) – Based on the DC Comics character created by Dwayne McDuffie, this show followed Virgil Hawkins, a teenage superhero dealing with real-life social issues like racism, gang violence, and bullying. And of course *The Boondocks* (2005–2014) – Created by Aaron McGruder, it is a satirical, politically charged series focusing a lot on social commentary and remains a major



influence within the Black community clips being circulated on TikTok and meme being referenced constantly.

Modern Black Animation

In recent years, the animation industry has seen a growing number of Black creatives taking the lead in storytelling and production. There are many standouts for me personally have been

Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018) & *Across the Spider-Verse* (2023) – These films star Miles Morales, a Black-Puerto Rican Spider-Man, and revolutionized animation with their unique visual style. I saw *Across the Spider-Verse* three times in theaters—I love this film so much! One of my favorite aspects is its depiction of Black hairstyles, something rarely shown in animation.



Carole & Tuesday (2019) – This anime features Carole, a Black girl, as one of the two main characters. The show follows her and Tuesday's journey to becoming music stars.

Wendell & Wild (2022) – A stop-motion animated film featuring a Black goth protagonist. While the plot isn't its strongest aspect, the art style and animation are stunning.

Intergalactic (2022) – An adult animated film created by Kid Cudi and Kenya Barris, featuring artists who worked on *Spider-Verse*.

Arcane (2021–2024) – An adult animated show. While Black characters aren't the main main character, they play crucial roles. One standout character is Mel Medarda, a powerful council member and the daughter of the series' main villain, Ambessa Medarda. I love Mel—she's such a cool and compelling character! and she is the main character of the follow up series.

