Exploitation Cinema and the Lesbian Imagination

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At the heart of the exploitation movie is the issue of the destructive nature of female sexuality (Zalcock, 2001, 59).

The sexism and homophobia of most exploitation films is unmistakable. Lesbian vampires and gay hitchhikers are obviously meant to be warnings against homosexuality. Yet to modern audiences no longer worried about the once very real fears that would turn into very real rejection, such camp storylines can now be enjoyed as pure fantasy and even convey a form of empowerment. After all, the hitchhikers in *Vanishing Point* (Richard C. Sarafian, 1971) may be slimy hijackers, but they are also unashamedly flamboyant on their way to San Francisco with their broken-down car that says “just married,” and they carry a gun in case somebody does not like it. Even more enticing is Mircalla, Hammer’s lesbian vampire in *The Vampires Lovers* (Roy Ward Baker, 1970). She may not be of reputable character, but she is certainly skillful at wooing young debutantes whom she mesmerizes with her painted eyelashes and well-rounded breasts. She is rather straightforward, too, as when she admits she is jealous of a male lover and adds: “I want you to love me for all your life.” And that in itself is a rare enough sight to be thoroughly enjoyed, along with the not-so-subtle subtext. Mircalla haunts her future victims’ dreams, resulting in orgasm-like trances, or attacks them from behind the camera, extending her hand into the frame towards the sleeping maiden. The all-around homophobic and phallocentric set-up, with a beautiful foreigner whose seduction of heterosexual women is fatal and who seems to be following the orders of a shadowy horseman figure, can easily be disregarded by modern queer audiences as a mark of yesterday’s fears and obsessions. Yet such readings outline the transgressive potential of exploitation films whose camp qualities are being reevaluated by modern queer audiences, including some who rejected the films when they first came out (Rich, 1995).
New Readings from a Safer Place

The renewed interest for exploitation cinema and its camp aesthetics is based on detachment. Modern audiences can laugh at forms of sexism and homophobia that seem so extreme they feel detached from present-day issues and are received as remnants of a bygone past. In the process, the same audiences can enjoy images that fulfill a need for earlier forms of representation, whether they are positive or (most often) not. Exploitation films with explicit homosexual content are being viewed today by LGBT audiences, whose self-image has been transformed by their elders’ victories. Although discrimination and hate crimes are still part of their lives, the forms of exclusion that queer people must face is in no way comparable to life in the 1970s, so that queer audiences are also aware of the diminished effect of negative images on the general audience. The impact of a national distribution and the often homophobic publicity that may have accompanied such films in the past have also disappeared. Older films are often seen in festivals; many of the critics and viewers quoted here may have re-discovered the films at such events, surrounded by a like-minded audience. Such displacements transform films that may have prompted queer people to protest in the past; they are being re-read today with a new imagination, largely freed from the political context in which they were made.

A remarkable example of this phenomenon is William Friedkin’s *Cruising*, a film that is not strictly speaking exploitation and that was picketed when it came out in 1980. Community members had actively disturbed the crew when filming in New York’s West Village in 1979 (Berkowitz, 1979, 17-18). Today, however, *Cruising* has become a “classic” that is shown in LGBT festivals. The plot is typically exploitative, with a gay twist and an interesting subtext. As the police suspect a serial killer of targeting gay men, officer Steve Burns (Al Pacino) is chosen to infiltrate the New York gay S&M leather scene because he resembles the victims. While the killer is revealed to be a gay man full of self-loathing, it is suggested that the detective is progressively drawn into the gay lifestyle he is investigating. The ambiguity is present in the title itself, as “cruising” can refer both to gay men cruising for sex and to police officers on patrol. However, the complex psychological dimension of the main character may have been largely invisible to most people at the time, blinded as they were by the counterbalancing effect of the gay serial killer plot in a highly prejudiced society.

Beyond this interpretation of the film, *Cruising* was also rediscovered because it offered the rare sight of the pre-AIDS cruising scene in actual S&M bars. Friedkin insisted on filming at bars of the West Village and did so in spite of major disturbances during shooting. Apparently, permissions were first obtained rather easily, without making the script available to the extras who were, for the most part, genuine gay West Villagers (Berkowitz, 1979). The result is still unsettling for its rough, documentary quality, in spite of countless more explicit films made since, and is received as a form of semi-fictional archive by the next generation. Although not unique, such occurrences are rare and sought out by queer audiences in search of a largely undocumented past (Crémieux 2013). What is valued today is not so much related to any particularly camp aesthetics but, rather, to the film’s documentary value and ambivalent subtext, largely overlooked at the time. The same is true of token or derogatory lesbian representations in many exploitation films.
A lesbian equivalent of *Cruising* in terms of reclaiming can be found in Russ Meyer’s 1965 *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*, although realism is not part of what the film has to offer. *Faster Pussycat* was famously reassessed by queer critic B. Ruby Rich in a 1995 *Village Voice* review, in which Rich recalls how she first dismissed the film as “retrograde male objectification of women’s bodies and desires further embellished by a portrait of lesbianism as twisted and depraved” (Rich, 1995, 56). It was 1970; a male friend had provided the 16mm copy that Rich showed a party of feminist friends on her projector. They collectively rejected it as soft-core porn. Dave Kehr, the man who had brought the film and who would become a famous film critic, left the party feeling unjustly attacked (Myers, 2014).

Obviously, he had not seen the film with the same eyes; nor would Rich twenty-five years later, once the film’s sexist and homophobic non-plot could simply be ignored in favor of its more interesting features: images of female strength (albeit brainlessly murderous) in a *Citizen Kane* spoofing style that largely contributed to its posterity. Rich concludes:

*Faster Pussycat* seen through a 1995 filter is a veritable Rosetta stone of contemporary attitude; ironic, irreverent, sexually polymorphous, mixing high and low forms, reversing camera angles as handily as it does power and prurience, bending dialogue to suit its whims and wits . . . See, Mr. Meyers, we’ve caught up. (Rich, 1995)

B. Ruby Rich describes a phenomenon she has been studying for years as a film critic and festival organizer: “how the audience writes the film.” With few exceptions, gay and lesbian characters of the exploitation era are hardly role models, and yet they are sought out by modern audiences who reinterpret them by spotting what has since been branded as “camp” (Rich describes them as “ironic, irreverent, sexually polymorphous” characters) and feels so provocative and ahead of its time, while discarding the sexist and homophobic elements that have become more or less innocuous with time. While it is true that, in *Faster Pussycat*, stunning women with big attitudes and bigger breasts kill off men with karate moves, they also kill women, including each other. They seem to have no other motive than senseless villainy as their characters are simply not supposed to make sense (an argument that can be extended to the whole film), so that they turn up barefoot in a bathing suit in the burning desert and start go-go dancing to radio music. As suggested by the title, *Faster Pussycat* is ripe with sexual energy. Varla, the dominatrix, and Billie, the blonde bimbo, are clearly bisexual, while Rosie is a lesbian in love with Varla. Although very clear, this is never made explicit in words or action, contrary to Varla and Billie’s lust for men. Yet in the end, the film is so engrossed in parody and clearly limited by the censorship of its time (all villains must die), that its fake misogynistic morals and exploitative aesthetics are simply enjoyable by modern, queer audiences who revel in the vital force expressed through sheer villainy.

Films like *Pussycat* or *Cruising*, both received as homophobic and/or sexist when they came out, offer unexpected visibility as compared to the undecipherable subtexts of more mainstream films of the time. The capacity of exploitation cinema to explore lurid themes and showcase excess is what makes it so attractive today, when minority audiences can safely assume no one else is taking them seriously anymore. In that sense, by taking everything with the pinch of salt that directors like Meyer or Friedkin sprinkled on their films at a time when the prevailing prejudice numbed most people’s taste buds, modern audiences may well feel they are “catching up” with directors now considered avant-garde geniuses instead of provocateurs banking on the homophobic zeitgeist.
Interestingly, in July 1994, Rich screened *Pussycat* along with *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) as part of a festival on “Scary Women” (Rich, 2014). *Basic Instinct*, a much more recent film, had also raised controversy over its depiction of lesbianism as a cult-like, violent hatred of men. Rich, however, had appreciated the film as a rare presentation of a man-killing woman rather than the opposite, and by screening it as part of a festival that made this spectatorial position very clear, *Basic Instinct* took on a different, empowering meaning.

**Badass Supermamas**

The revival by feminists of films that they would have hated at the time (although Rich enjoyed *Basic Instinct* when it came out and simply shared her reading of the film) is made possible only by a distancing that raises more complex issues when discussing white-produced blaxploitation films. In an article about the reemergence of 1970s “retro products and pop cultural icons,” Jennifer Brody looks at the new reading by black feminists of blaxploitation icons, especially Cleopatra Jones in *The Watermelon Woman* (Cheryl Dunye, 1996) and *Set It Off* (F. Gary Gray, 1996), also discussed here. She starts off by asking the following question:

What can it mean that these feminists (and black lesbian feminists in particular) have revived Cleopatra Jones? What might be taken to be familiar about Cleo’s character for such readers? Are the previous citations nostalgic representations that express an impossible desire for what never was? In order to (mis)recognize Cleo as a “queer” black heroine, these readers have creatively deformed and erased aspects of the film character’s initial reception. In other words, the image of Cleopatra Jones can be “queered” only through a canny counterreading that privileges different desires that result from spatiotemporal distance. (Brody, 2000)

Brody, of course, willingly takes part in these new queer readings or, rather, counterreadings of blaxploitation heroines. She starts by reviewing some of the academic readings of the film, including by male authors, and acknowledges how feminist and lesbian readings can be assumed to have been rare at the time (in fact, there seems to be no record of such readings at all). Yet they are clearly perceptible today. Brody’s own feminist reading uncovers the sexual undertones of the collaboration of Cleopatra Jones (1973) and her Asian homologue, local detective Mi Ling Fong, in *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* (Charles Bail, 1975). What was correctly received as a female buddy film at the time is later re-read through the same homoerotic lens that male buddy films have been subjected to since (see Fuchs, 1992, 194-212), so that Brody’s connection of the last scene, in which Cleopatra Jones waves from the door of her departing plane, to the final scenes of heterosexual romances such as *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) and *The Bodyguard* (Mick Jackson, 1992), seems perfectly sound. What’s more, both *Cleopatra Jones* films pit a black heroine against a white female villain, Shelly Winters in the first installment as Mommy, an evil lesbian drug lord, “replaced” in the second film by Stella Stevens as the Dragon Lady, also a white lesbian drug lord, whose presence is only made more unlikely by the Asian context, since the mission takes place in Hong Kong and Macao. The presence of lesbian villains and their overt objectification of the heroines only make it easier for lesbian viewers to project their own readings of the main characters’ potential sexuality. In both films, including the second one in Asia, the black/white antagonism mirrors the male blaxploitation film formula of pitting a black hero against a white evil mastermind, who is, however, never gay. Blaxploitation heroes, on
the contrary, usually engage in consensual interracial sex, unlike their female counterparts (with the notable exception of Pam Grier’s character in Jack Hill’s 1972 The Big Bird Cage). Because the movies are promoted as exploitation films with a black female lead, the relative heterosexual chastity of some of the heroines only makes the lesbian subtext more easily readable. In Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold, Mi Ling Fong and Cleopatra Jones clearly admire each other for their brains, combat skills and beauty. They repeatedly compliment each other on their fit bodies and skin tone. It is more than clear that, if one of them were a man (which is not too hard to imagine given their incredible combat skills and Tamara Dobson standing 6 feet 2 inches tall), they would sleep together, especially in a movie that is otherwise fairly sexually permissive (the Dragon Lady engages in lesbian orgies and woos the two black drug dealers by letting them enjoy themselves with her girls). The fact that Tamara Dobson never had any known romantic attachments and kept her private life very private until her early death in 2006, at the age of 59, only contributes to such readings of her roles. She also refused roles that involved nudity. Perhaps due to her Kung-Fu/Drag-Queen persona in Cleopatra Jones, Dobson is one of the rare iconic figures to have a following among both gays and lesbians, along with other strong females, from Joan Crawford to Madonna.

One scene from The Watermelon Woman illustrates this lesbian following and connects Cleopatra Jones with other films featuring strong central female characters. In The Watermelon Woman, the main character, Cheryl (played by director Cheryl Dunye), is an aspiring filmmaker and video store clerk working on a documentary about a forgotten black actress from the 1930s, credited as “The Watermelon Woman.” Dunye’s film is full of references not only to race movies—the title itself being a possible reference to Watermelon Man (Melvin Van Peebles, 1970)—but to a great variety of productions. Early on in the film, as a secondary plot to her filmmaking efforts, Cheryl picks up a white girl in a video store (Guinevere Turner playing Diana) by suggesting that she rent Cleopatra Jones, which Diana had picked out, or, alternately, Carrie (Brian De Palma, 1976), Alien (Ridley Scott, 1979) and Repulsion (Roman Polanski, 1965), three relatively old movies with central female characters, rather than the lesbian classic Personal Best (Robert Towne, 1982), which Diana had first selected. Diana ends up renting Cleopatra Jones and Repulsion (it’s a two for one deal). Because she is interested not only in older explicit white lesbian films (Personal Best) but also in strong blaxploitation female figures and their possible lesbian subtext, Diana is established as someone Cheryl might enjoy dating. In return, Cheryl shows she is interested in all kinds of films that have strong female characters and does not narrow her film fantasies down to blaxploitation.

While The Watermelon Woman mentions Cleopatra Jones in passing, the much more confidential 16-min video Badass Supermama, produced the same year, pays full tribute to blaxploitation female stars, specifically Pam Grier. Badass Supermama offers a close commentary of a number of cult scenes from Foxy Brown (Jack Hill, 1974) and “Sheba, Baby” (William Girdler, 1975), including the famous all-white lesbian bar sequence in Foxy Brown. In this scene, Foxy Brown (Pam Grier), a self-taught detective working undercover as a prostitute meets up with her protégée, Claudia (Juanita Brown), who has unknowingly wandered into a lesbian bar and is being chatted up by a butch blonde named Bobbie. When Foxy tries to pull Claudia away, Bobbie starts a fight that quickly gets out of hand. While Foxy’s encounter with lesbian life is less than cordial, one patron does recognize her as a “friend” that should be left alone. The scene, however, ends in an outrageous bar-brawl.
Inyang, who superimposes her image to place herself in the bar, rejects this outcome:

This chaos did not make sense to me at sixteen. I grew up surrounded by women loving women. Women who created a family. A sisterhood all their own. It was hard to watch women fighting women; black fighting white. Gay fighting straight. Now tell me, Foxy, whose fantasy is this? All the lines are drawn. There is no sisterhood in your world. (Hankin, 2002, 85)

Inyang suggests that the lesbian world depicted here is a fantasy she cannot work with—it is aggressive, racially divided and in fact, all-white, creating a fitting enemy to the black heroine, in keeping with blaxploitation’s racial politics of antagonizing the schism between blacks vs. whites, whether male or female. Kelly Hankin pointedly comments:

Inyang’s refusal to accept Foxy Brown’s vision of racially divided lesbian bar space, as well as Badass Supernama’s insertion of Inyang within that space, foregrounds the figure of the representational and spectatorial black lesbian, whose existence Foxy Brown disavows. (Hankin, 84)

As a black lesbian, Inyang feels excluded from a scene that opposes black heterosexual women and white lesbians, as was the formula in several blaxploitation films to follow. And yet she goes on to explain that she inevitably counter-fantasized a relationship between Foxy Brown and Claudia. How is it possible that white producers and filmmakers intent on exploiting women’s sexuality create images that fulfill a young black lesbian’s desire for identification? In her study of mostly exploitation films entitled Girl Gangs on Film (2001), Bev Zalcock remarks about the Women in Prison (WIP) films that they were “peopled with characters from groups marginalized or excluded by mainstream Hollywood, namely women of colour and lesbians” (36). This is true of a lot of exploitation films, especially blaxploitation, so that female-driven, action-packed blaxploitation films are being re-read in a context of much more explicit queer representation and production.

In her 1995 article “Black Lesbian Spectatorship and Pleasure in Popular Cinema,” Z. Isiling Nataf also posited some unexpected lesbian identification moments in early blaxploitation movies. In one of the first scenes of Melvin Van Peebles’s Sweet Sweetback’s Badass Song (1971), Sweetback (Melvin Van Peebles) is giving a transvestite sex show. He plays a very butch lesbian who passes for a man, reveals her/his bra and dildo, pleasures the woman he/she picked up as a man, before fully undressing and unstrapping to use his own penis, whose appearance is summoned by the “Good Dyke Fairy Godmother” and her magic wand. Sweet Sweetback has routinely been criticized by film scholars as particularly demeaning to women, and Nataf readily agrees that “a reading of this scene in the first instance results in the myth that lesbians want to be men, that butch lesbians are proof of that and that femme lesbians are not really lesbians” (74). Yet Nataf also believes Van Peebles casting himself as the “man alias lesbian” (as scripted) offers the black lesbian a representation of a familiar scenario: “a black butch-femme coupling in which the femme is visibly satisfied with the lovemaking and the butch’s dildo” (75). She further comments that the scene introduces a film where “all marginalized black people are invited to identify with this outlaw white cop-killing black stud” (Nataf, 74), which echoes Zalcock’s connection between exploitation cinema and the representation of marginalized people, but from the point of view of the audience: exploitation cinema, with the added distance of time, may indeed allow marginalized people to identify with its violent heroes and heroines.

Zalcock further remarks about the sexuality of women in gangs that “there is, anyway, always a suggestion in exploitation films that groups of wild and violent women are
somehow ‘deviant’ and this is frequently plugged into a repressed lesbian sub-text” (128), a statement I believe can be extended to all strong women in exploitation films. In contradiction with often overtly homophobic plots, female exploitation heroines display a form of masculinity that transcends the exploitatively sexy clothes to create a strong lesbian subtext. Blaxploitation icon Pam Grier’s lesbian following was celebrated when she was cast in the Showtime series *The L Word* (2004-2009), as Bette Porter’s straight sister Kit. This came only a few years after her return to fame thanks to Tarantino’s 1997 Pam Grier vehicle, *Jackie Brown*, a veritable homage to her as a star and to exploitation cinema in general. Jackie Brown’s cold plan to steal Ordell’s money and get him killed makes for one strong female heroine. She does not indulge in any kind of sex (except for one kiss) and does not seem afraid of anything. Ordell (Samuel Jackson) says she is “too cool for school,” and indeed, she’s certainly too cool to be any straight exploitation chick, a role played by Bridget Fonda’s Melanie who has a few snappy lines typical of exploitation cinema.

**The Sexuality of Angels**

16 Most explicit perhaps in its blaxploitation homage with a lesbian twist is Queen Latifah’s Cleo in *Set It Off* (1996). Following on the success of his debut film *Friday* (1995), F. Gary Gray created a classic heist film with four working-class black women and childhood friends as the unlikely girl gang. Three of them have good reasons to engage in this high-risk criminal activity. Stoney (Jada Pinkett) wants revenge for her innocent kid brother who was gunned down by the police for resembling a bank robbery suspect; Frankie (Vivica A. Fox), having been fired from her bank teller job for knowing a robber although she had nothing to do with the plan, is happy to go along; T.T. (Kimberly Elise), who is at first reticent, needs money to keep social services away from her child. The fourth member of the gang, Cleo (Queen Latifah), has no such motive and is the only true “gangster” of the lot. She is also a butch lesbian who flaunts her peroxide blonde girlfriend Ursula (Samantha MacLachlan) and ignores her girlfriends’ signs of disgust for her sexuality. While in the exploitation films of the 1970s strong black women fought against lesbian villains, in the 1990s they have become the gangster heroes instead of the men, and the lesbians are amongst them. *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008) combines the two formulas: police detective Kima Greggs (Sonja Sohn), along with her alter-ego, hit-woman Snoop, renew the blaxploitation female aesthetic as strong and charismatic lesbian characters.17

17 Set in a female prison today, *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-), described as “the love child of *Oz* and *The L Word*” by *The New Yorker* (Nussbaum, 2013), harks back to many women in prison (WIP) movies of the past. For example, the main plot of a naïve blonde girl discovering the world of hardened criminals is reminiscent of *Caged* (John Cromwell, 1950), while the beetle contest episode (S02E01) is reprised from *The Big Doll House* (1971). Directed by Jack Hill and starring Pam Grier, *The Big Doll House* is remarkable for its openly lesbian character perplexingly called Grear, an ex-prostitute who now hates all men and therefore is a lesbian who “likes to be on top” (facetiously referring to the bunk beds). The equally good-looking women who are masterminding their collective escape are unambiguously straight except for Grear’s lover, a self-destructive junkie who ultimately kills her, in keeping with stereotypical lesbian narratives of the times. Most importantly, the guards are horrible lesbian predators (as in *Caged* and many WIP narratives). The
sadistic lesbian guard is a staple character, epitomized by the nazisploitation classic *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS* (Don Edmonds, 1975), and a close cousin of the blaxploitation white lesbian gangster (Kathryn Loder also plays the female, albeit heterosexual villain in *Foxy Brown*). While *Orange is the New Black* directly references these exploitation films—*Ilsa* aside—the evil guards are male and the female guards may well be lesbians, or potential lesbians, but they are never demonized, on the contrary. *Orange is the New Black* manages to rewrite the WIP narrative and its previously very negative lesbian content and ironically create what could be a sequel to *The L Word*, if Jenny’s murderer got caught and sent to prison. The show may well elicit new readings of exploitation WIP films such as *The Big Doll House* (or even *Ilsa!*), which have yet to be reclaimed by lesbian audiences.

Although she gets killed in *The Big Doll House*, the Grear character resurfaces as Blossom (still Pam Grier) in the non-sequel follow-up, *The Big Bird House* (Jack Hill, 1972). The reincarnation is accompanied, as possibly suggested by her much more feminine name otherwise rather at odds with her personality, by a change of sexuality. It is made very clear that Blossom thoroughly enjoys rough and playful sex with her male partner in the revolution, Django, played by Sid Haig, also the prison guard trying to get into Grear’s pants (not that she ever wore any) in *The Big Doll House*. The 1972 film is remarkable for starring—in an otherwise white film—a black heroine with a strong character and some unlikely kung-fu moves. These strong and/or violent female characters of 1970s exploitation films greatly influenced television and its own exploitation shows, albeit expunged of a lot of the sex, race and violence that the movies allowed. A series like *Charlie’s Angels* (ABC, 1976-1981) owes great debt to the exploitation genre as it was reimagined, and much attenuated, by late 1970s television networks.

Contrary to *Orange is the New Black*, and perhaps because it centers on upper-class women, *The L Word* contains few direct exploitation film references. One episode of *The L Word* (S05E03, Jan. 2008), however, includes a pre-credit sequence that is a parody of *Charlie’s Angels* and its three now very camp heroines. Shane (Katherine Moenning), Alice (Leisha Hailey) and Helena (Rachel Shelley) are the three Angels who work with Bosley, impersonated by Tina (Laurel Holloman). Playing on the lesbian following of the original series, *The L Word* sequence introduces the Angels as lesbians on lesbian missions. Indeed, they follow Charlie’s instructions, voiced by Bette (Jennifer Beals), who greets them with a “good morning, lesbians,” which Bosley/Tina echoes with his “Okay, lesbians,” instead of the expected “angels.” The lesbians’ mission is to determine Jenny’s (Mia Kirshner) ambiguous sexuality thanks to their gaydar guns, which, interestingly enough, prove somewhat inefficient (what gaydar isn’t?). The lesbian angels move in slow motion, with a lot of hair flinging. This underlines the artificiality of the initial series and its focus on sex appeal as much as action and bravado, not entirely unlike *The L Word*. The lesbian angels are even reassured by Charlie that their mission is not going to affect their looks: “I promise you, girls, I won’t let anything happen to your hair or makeup.” But the parallel goes both ways: the sequence not only underlines *The L Word*’s much criticized exploitation aspects, it reveals *Charlie’s Angels* as a lesbian fantasy. In a study of this sequence, Julie Scanlon comments: “Recontextualisation in *The L Word* can act to resignify and reclaim those past products, creating or revalidating their status as lesbian or queer, making visible the invisible.” (Scanlon, 236) By spoofing *Charlie’s Angels*, *The L Word* casts a queer eye on straight culture, perhaps with a will to influence the perception the straight majority has of itself and of its connections with queer people.
The *L Word* sequence came in the wake of the 2000 *Charlie’s Angels* film whose very campy, always tongue-in-cheek script never explores the angels’ bisexual potential, although the trio’s love interests are consistently unsatisfactory and generally incompatible with a superheroic lifestyle. Contemporary queer audiences, however, recognized *Charlie’s Angels*’ lesbian potential as the *L Word* prologue proves: the sequence is the result of a script contest won by one Molly Fisher, a fan of the series. Her queer vision of *Charlie’s Angels*, both the series and the film, is shared by many and directly induced by the film’s camp humor.

Indeed, although the 2000 film keeps the angels on a straight eye-candy diet (including Matt LeBlanc and Luke Wilson), this does not preclude gender-bending and counter stereotypes. For example, the angels usually don exceedingly revealing outfits when going undercover, except when they must cross-dress to impersonate two male executives to bypass a bio-technological security system. Although they are straight, the angels defy a few gender stereotypes. Dylan (Drew Barrymore) is a womanizer in reverse. She sleeps with men whose names she cannot remember and whose egos she easily crushes, only to use them again later. Natalie (Cameron Diaz) is the only one who seems desperately romantic, though answering her cell phone in the middle of a fight does make it difficult to focus on her boyfriend’s conversation. As for the villain Vivian (Kelly Lynch), she seduces Bosley (Bill Murray) to get what she wants and keeps berating her associate in crime, Eric Knox (Sam Rockwell), observing his incompetence with lines such as: “Never send a man to do a woman’s job.” Concerning women’s traditional “jobs,” everything Alex (Lucy Liu) attempts to cook turns into a weapon due to sheer domestic incompetence—it explodes, or comes out of the oven as hard as a rock. And while Alex can cope with her trailer being riddled with millions of bullets, when as a result, her perfect soufflé caves in, she is ready to seek revenge! The increasingly impossible stunts of the four highly trained women also question the validity of similar male-driven action scenes. Both *The L Word* sequence and the 2000 *Charlie’s Angels* film are reading 1970s exploitation action heroines through a feminist, gender-bending lens without ever scripting explicit lesbian heroines, in keeping with the original.

Angela Robinson’s short (2003) and then feature film (2004) *D.E.B.S.*, on the contrary, is an earlier *Charlie’s Angels* parody that pulls the lesbian subtext right to the foreground. Four knock-out high-schoolers are recruited by an F.B.I.-like agency called D.E.B.S. (Discipline Energy Beauty Strength) through tests hidden in SAT multiple choice grids. They wear plaid skirt uniforms, answer to a hologram, Ms. Petrie (Holland Taylor), and are dispatched by Mr. Phipps (Michael Clarke Duncan). The tagline describes them as “crime-fighting hotties with killer bodies.” That is, until their leader, Amy, falls for archenemy Lucy Diamond (named Lucy in the Sky in the short film) and the action can really begin. Contrary to the 2000 *Charlie’s Angels* adaptation, *D.E.B.S.* foregrounds the lesbian element so much that it was received as an LGBT festival favorite much more than as an action film. Lucy is identified as a lesbian from the start and Amy’s disinterest for her boyfriend makes the revelation of their mutual attraction less than a surprise.

Each of the D.E.B.S.’ sexy personas is based on a coded characteristic, not unlike the Fox Force Five of *Pulp Fiction* fame\(^1\): Dominique is French, Max loves guns, and Janet is an air head with a killer instinct. Amy’s sexiness remains undefined. In spite of being the best, she questions her calling. Can she trust the agency? Should she go to art school in Barcelona? That is, until she finds out who she really is, a lesbian in love with her archenemy. *D.E.B.S.* validates lesbian fantasies about sexy spies from the past fighting
villains who, in seventies exploitation films, more often than not were lesbians. The heroine’s potential lesbianism remained an evil fantasy, happily embraced by today’s queer audiences and filmmakers. It is only fitting that Angela Robinson would go on to direct episodes from *The L Word* and participate in the series that “made visible the invisible.”

## Conclusion

This mission, which could be said to be part and parcel of lesbian cinema, is also shared by exploitation cinema. It may be why, with time, it became an improbable vehicle for feminist and lesbian fantasies. According to Bev Zalcock, a connoisseur of trash cinema, what separates the exploitation picture off from the more respectable, higher budget Hollywood movie, as Pam Cook has observed, is that its mechanisms are more overt [...] and as such, function to reveal rather than conceal the underlying patriarchal codes [...] (Zalcock, 2001, 34)

Could this capacity of the exploitation genre to reveal the vulgarity of oppression be why LGBT-festival audiences are enjoying seeing films that do not condemn discrimination? Could it be why so many films that were once rejected are being revisited from a queer point of view? The distance of time and the transformation of society have certainly altered the way queer characters of the 1970s are perceived today. Even though the sexual identities of queer villains are only very remotely connected to the social reality of the times, they nevertheless reveal a too often concealed past, including the representation of prejudice and fantasy.

The overt mechanisms of exploitation films and TV shows of the 1970s are certainly part of what makes them so prone to being parodied in productions that revive the interest for the genre, as *Jackie Brown* undeniably did. Following Zalcock, the very nature of exploitation cinema seems almost bound to automatically create a lesbian subtext. A film like *Jackie Brown*, in its efforts to reproduce the feel and strength of exploitation cinema, does seem to inescapably, and most likely involuntarily, call for lesbian fantasies through a strong, no-nonsense, independent Black woman, even though she is characterized as straight. In the same way, lesbian rewritings of exploitation cinema and its televised offspring seem almost inevitable.

The exploitation genre is being largely reassessed, including by creative queer filmmakers and audiences. Twenty-first century audiences have gained the freedom to love, hate, denigrate—and enjoy denigrating—films that were neither made for them or by them, but whose fleeting, incongruous LGBT characters are an endless resource for the queer imagination.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


NOTES

1. The notion of camp is often restricted to gay culture. No such limits, however, can be put on camp. Although Susan Sontag dedicates her “Notes on Camp” to Oscar Wilde, whom she quotes at length and presents as the camp avant-garde, she never equates camp with gay and her list of camp figures of androgyny include “the haunting androgynous vacancy behind the perfect beauty of Greta Garbo.”

2. For instance, the official trailer for The Big Bird Cage (1972) establishes the main bad guy as “a half-man” for whom women “do not have anything [he]’d be interested in.” He is later referred to as a “fat pansy” and a “savage degenerate.” In the film, he eventually gets castrated by the heroine, as the last images of the trailer clearly suggest. Less prominently but still very clearly, the Foxy Brown trailer (1974) includes the “black belt in bar stool” line (discussed later in this article). The Vanishing Point (1971) trailer includes a few seconds of the gay hitchhiker scene: just after the voice-over explains that “everybody’s after Kowalski,” the image cuts to one of the hitchhikers menacingly saying “because you think we’re queers.”

3. The definition of an exploitation film can be limited to the early seventies or go back to the 1920s and span to the present, depending on the author, and viewer. Regardless of time frame and geography, exploitation cinema is usually defined as cheaply produced “B movies” involving no major stars (at the time) that “exploit” contemporary anxieties that most classically include sex, violence, racial tension and sometimes, homosexuality. A film like Cruising was not received as an exploitation film at the time, although it certainly exploits the voyeuristic attraction of the gay underground and a deeply ingrained homophobia.

4. Among many others, film reviews such as Pierre Murat’s for Télérama in 2011, which praises the main character’s not-so-ambiguous ambiguities, can be compared to Roger Ebert’s exasperated review on the same issue when the film came out in 1980. Generally speaking, reviews of the film vary much in their praise or criticism, with a 50% tomatorater on Rottentomatoes.com (last visited January 12, 2016). The DVD collector release in 2007 did not give rise to comparable gay protest.

5. An example of this cult following is the 2013 James Franco and Travis Mathews film, Interior. Leather. Bar., presented at the International Sundance Film Festival, in which the two gay filmmakers work together to recreate the 40 minutes of Cruising that William Friedkin had to cut out to avoid an X rating.

6. For a longer discussion of Rich’s change of heart, see DeFino, 2014, 36-37.

7. Dave Kehr wrote several articles about Faster! and Russ Meyer’s films in general. In a 1974 article for Reader: Chicago’s Free Weekly, he likens Meyer’s films to Preston Sturges’ comedies filmed in Sergei Eisenstein style, as reported by David K. Frasier in Russ Meyer: The Life and Films (164).

8. For more on lesbianism and violence, and how feminist historians have researched rumored couples of the past, see Rich’s “Lethal Lesbians” chapter in New Queer Cinema (Rich, 2013, 103-122).

9. One notable exception is the gay bartender that lives across from Shaft’s apartment building in Gordon Parks’ 1971 Shaft, an MGM production that tapped into the blaxploitation phenomenon. The bartender and Shaft seem to be casual friends, showing that Shaft is comfortable not only across the racial line (the bartender is white) but also sexually. Shaft is established early on as a smooth and successful ladies’ man, so hip as to be unthreatened by homosexuality.

10. Interestingly enough, blaxploitation female stars were exclusively directed by white males, unlike in nineties urban movies such as Set It Off (F. Gary Gray, 1996) and Poetic Justice (John Singleton, 1993).
11. The queerest homage to Tamara Dobson to date may be African American drag queen performer RuPaul’s *Starrbooty* (2007) about a supermodel agent (RuPaul) who must go undercover as a hooker to save her niece who has been kidnapped by a human organ smuggler. The references to blaxploitation, James Bond and John Waters abound, but Starrbooty as a character is most connected to Cleopatra Jones, with her Kung-Fu skills and big hair. RuPaul has shared his lifelong admiration of Tamara Dobson in several interviews.

12. Cheryl’s investigation uncovers a rich past for black lesbians in film, which is revealed to be entirely fictitious, as a number of unlikely coincidences suggest. Cheryl discovers the Watermelon Woman’s real name was Faye Richardson, that she was the lover of director Martha Page, a Dorothy Arzner look-alike, before making race movies with Liberty Studios. When black-cast movies faded out, she turned to singing and met June Walker, a black woman she spent the rest of her life with in Philadelphia, and who is interviewed in *The Watermelon Woman*. Other interviews include a zany Camille Paglia and a peppy volunteer at C.L.I.T, the Center for Lesbian Info and Technology. C.L.I.T. happens to have a whole box of material on black lesbians in Philadelphia, and the watermelon woman’s photos are right on top, dedicated “To June Walker, special friend.”

13. I have not been able to see this short film and can only trust Kelly Hankin’s long description of it in *Girls in the Back Room: Looking at the Lesbian Bar* (2002).

14. Donald Bogle feels that “the film debased the black woman, depicting her as little more than a whore” (Bogle, 2001, 236), while Ed Guerrero denounces *Sweetback* as a “sexploitative pimp, hustler hero,” “raping a woman at knifepoint out of ‘revolutionary’ expediency” (Guerrero, 1993, 91).

15. *Jackie Brown* is full of references to various exploitation films. The title is a conflation of Jack Hill and Foxy Brown, with lettering that is identical to that of *Foxy Brown* (Jack Hill, 1974). “Across 110th street,” the theme song from Barry Shear’s 1972 action-crime film, is used during the credit sequences. The film begins with blaxploitation star Pam Grier walking the halls of an airport whose walls carry the marks of time; the LAX walls, also to be found in the similar opening sequence from *Superchick* (Ed Forsyth, 1973). The gangster-copper plot starts off with Jackie’s arrest for smuggling money and drugs, followed by a short stay in a women’s prison. The required amount of violence is carried out by gun-smuggler/drug-dealer/pimp Ordell Robbie, who must first get rid of a potential snitch. The film is punctuated by bursts of lethal aggression. The sex and nudity, however, are scarce and mostly concern secondary character Melanie. Pam Grier, in contrast to her seventies films, remains fully dressed at all times.

16. All blaxploitation she-roses are either prisoners, detectives or vigilantes; they are not gangsters like most blaxploitation heroes, such as Superfly or Black Caesar.

17. While, unlike Kima, Snoop is never shown in a lesbian relationship, in the scene when she and Chris are arrested by Bunk, Freamon and Kima (season 4, episode 13), she does tell detective Bunk that, just like him, she is “thinking about some pussy.” Snoop is portrayed as trans first and foremost, but it is also always assumed that she is not straight.

18. In *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman) tells Vincent Vega (John Travolta) how she starred in a TV-pilot that never got picked up: “It was a show about a team of female secret agents called Fox Force Five. Fox as we’re a bunch of foxy chicks. Force as we’re a force to be reckoned with. Five as there’s one ... two ... three ... four ... five of us. There was a blonde one, Sommerset O’Neal from that show *Baton Rouge*, she was the leader. A Japanese one, a black one, a French one and a brunette one, me. We all had special skills. Sommerset had a photographic memory, the Japanese fox was a kung fu master, the black girl was a demolition expert, the French fox’ specialty was sex...” This connection adds to the referential nature or parodic lesbian culture, Tarantino having greatly contributed to the rediscovery of exploitation cinema. Much like *D.E.B.S.*, *Fox Force Five* sounds like a Tarantino remash of the *Charlie’s Angels* concept.
19. Angela Robinson directed nine *L Word* episodes, not including S05E03 and its *Charlie’s Angels* mashup.

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**ABSTRACTS**

When they were first released, exploitation films were harshly criticized for their depiction of women and homosexuals. However, with the distance of time and the transformation of society, feminist audiences are reclaiming films whose quaint queers they can now enjoy not only as a trace of the past, but also as subversive characters they are seeing in a new light. This paper focuses on exploitation films such as *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965) or *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* (1975), and their reassessment, including in films and TV series that pay homage to female action heroines of the past.

À leur sortie, les films d’exploitation ont été critiqués pour leur représentation des femmes et des homosexuelles. Cependant, le recul du temps et les transformations de la société permettent aux publics féministes de s’approprier des films et leurs curieux personnages queer qu’ils peuvent désormais apprécier non seulement comme traces du passé, mais aussi comme des personnages véritablement subversifs. Cet article évoque des films d’exploitation comme *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (1965) ou *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* (1975), ainsi que leur relecture *a posteriori* par des films ou des séries télévisées qui rendent hommage à leurs héroïnes.

**INDEX**

*Mots-clés:* cinéma, exploitation, sexploitation, blaxploitation, féminisme, queer, réception, lesbienne

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