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Cinema Journal, 49, Number 2, Winter 2010, pp. 86-105 (Article)

Published by Michigan Publishing

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.0.0183>

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"Tryin' to Get Over": *Super Fly*, Black Politics, and Post-Civil Rights Film Enterprise

by EITHNE QUINN

Abstract: *Super Fly* was a landmark case of African American participation in major-release filmmaking. The film's narrative about Harlem cocaine dealers dramatized black business dynamism operating inside white-dominated power structures, and this spoke reflexively to the circumstances of the film's making. This essay offers a reappraisal of *Super Fly* and new perspectives on the blaxploitation cycle in light of post-civil rights opportunities and constraints.

If you would give me the five biggest pimps and pushers in this country, the black ones, and I could persuade them for one year to drop their hustle on the corner, if I could say, "Look, for one year I want you to take that same push, that same organizational ability, and put it in films"—well, at the end of that one year black folks would take over the whole film industry.

Ossie Davis, *Black Enterprise*, 1973¹

S*uper Fly* (Gordon Parks Jr., 1972) is the most significant film of the blaxploitation production trend. It sparked the greatest controversy (outcry following its summer release gave rise to the term "blaxploitation"), won the largest black youth audience, and has proved the most culturally influential.² However, the film has received patchy scholarly attention.³ The imbalance between significance and scrutiny is partly explained by the film's vilification. Scholars have

1 Lindsay Patterson, "An Interview with Ossie Davis: How Can Blacks Make the Money to Be Made on Black Films?" *Black Enterprise*, September 1973, 45.

2 The term "blaxploitation" first appeared in the wake of *Super Fly*'s release, as a Junius Griffin quotation in "NAACP Takes Militant Stand on Black Exploitation Films," *Hollywood Reporter*, August 10, 1972. *Shaft* (which earned \$7 million) was the only blaxploitation film to return more than *Super Fly* (\$6.4 million). Figures from Lawrence Cohn, "All-Time Film Rental Champs," *Variety*, May 10, 1993.

3 Relative to its significance, *Super Fly* tends to be treated summarily in scholarly surveys of blaxploitation. The one article to date solely on *Super Fly* concerns its acclaimed sound track: Christopher Sieving, "Super Sonics: Song Score as Counter-Narration in *Super Fly*," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 13 (2001): 77–91.

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been reluctant to engage with *Super Fly*—which centers on a heroic black cocaine dealer—because it was so strongly (and understandably) condemned by commentators on its release. As Ed Guerrero summarizes, “*Super Fly* came to be the main target of a collective fury and the prime example of degenerate black images on film.”⁴ When the film is discussed, the dominant interpretive modes, consequently, have been ideological critique, reception study, and audience effects, modes that tend to shift focus away from processes of production and aspects of film content.⁵ Many accounts of *Super Fly*, and indeed the blaxploitation cycle generally, proceed from the assumption that these films—with the exception of Melvin Van Peebles’s radical *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* in 1971—were a case of whites financially and thematically exploiting black audiences. Commentator René Ward offered an early, terse expression of this dynamic: “black films, white profits.”⁶

A broad premise of this article is that there has been an underestimation of African American involvement and agency in the making of key blaxploitation features. Although the vast majority of distributors and producers were white, many of the most influential black action films were directed and/or written by African Americans. Moreover, films with black directors tended to generate behind-the-camera opportunities for minority workers. Blaxploitation-era filmmaking took place in the aftermath of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (prohibiting job bias) when intense battles were fought to dismantle the entrenched culture of black exclusion from desirable work. Film was a key site of contest: an industry full of good jobs and high revenues in which African Americans had long featured as entertainers and consumers. Informed by the empowerment agenda of the time, the directors of the most successful and prototypical blaxploitation films—Van Peebles and the junior Parks, and also Ossie Davis (*Cotton Comes to Harlem*, 1970) and Gordon Parks Sr. (*Shaft*, 1971)—were among legions of black people across America who sought to seize new opportunities and convert the formal promises of civil rights legislation into concrete jobs and infrastructural reform.⁷

This article argues that *Super Fly*, contrary to conventional interpretation, is a landmark case in the history of black financing and participation in major-release filmmaking. It explores how the production’s black enterprise was complemented and compounded by the film’s narrative about African American business operations. *Super*

4 Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 101. On black condemnation at the time, see Francis Ward, “*Superfly*: The Black Film Ripoff,” in *The Black Position* 2 (1972), 37–42; and “Fight ‘Black Exploitation’ in Pix,” *Daily Variety*, August 16, 1972.

5 See for instance Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 95–97, 100–103; and William Lyne’s powerful critique in “No Accident: From Black Power to Black Box Office,” *African American Review* 34, no. 1 (2000): 42–47. For exceptions, see Thomas Doherty, “The Black Exploitation Picture: *Super Fly* and *Black Caesar*,” *Ball State University Forum* (Spring 1983): 30–39; and Paula Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 101–107.

6 René Ward, “Black Films, White Profits,” *Black Scholar* 7/8 (May 1976): 13–24.

7 *Cotton Comes to Harlem* sparked the blaxploitation production trend and was the first studio-made, black-directed film to make a significant profit, returning \$5.1 million in rentals. Its director and cowriter, Ossie Davis, was a civil rights giant who used this film success to cofound Third World Cinema Corporation. Van Peebles wrote, directed, and coproduced *Sweetback* (returning \$4.1 million), which had a multiracial technical crew. Rental figures from Cohn, “All-Time Film Rental Champs.”

Fly's focus on black underground wealth generation was energized by its rejection of the two classic protest strategies of integration and transformation—the film spoke to disillusionment with both racially ameliorative civil rights politics and radical black nationalism. I argue that in its staging of business dynamism outside of mainstream white structures, the film proved extremely attractive in a hardening sociopolitical climate. As a production and as a text, *Super Fly* exposed the tremendous possibilities and pleasures of ghettocentric entrepreneurialism while also revealing the tremendous political, financial, and social costs of such entrepreneurialism. For this reason it stands as a preeminent and revelatory story of the early post-civil rights period.⁸

Making *Super Fly*. The blaxploitation cycle of 1970–1975 encompasses a varied group of films, typically with low budgets, black action heroes, and soul sound tracks, aimed at the black youth market.⁹ To grasp the significance of the behind-the-scenes employment achieved by these blaxploitation films, one needs to consider the industry's stark racial inequities in the early 1970s. White people had overwhelming control of production, distribution, and exhibition. There was no senior black executive at a major studio, and none of the seventy or so companies in the Association of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), which managed Hollywood labor, was black owned or run.¹⁰ Film's craft unions were notoriously white and protective, using an experience roster system that all but excluded minorities. Indeed, some union locals in the prestigious areas of camerawork and sound had no black members.¹¹ In terms of exhibition, out of about fourteen thousand movie theaters nationwide, less than twenty were black owned or operated.¹²

Unsurprisingly, then, when the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission held hearings in Hollywood in 1969, it found "clear evidence of a pattern or practice of discrimination" in hiring, which had as its "foreseeable effect the employment only of whites."¹³ Following these findings, the Justice Department took the extraordinary step of preparing lawsuits against practically the entire industry under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.¹⁴ It ultimately dropped its threatened action, settling instead on a two-year voluntary agreement that established a goal of 20 percent minority employment in

8 The "post-civil rights" period started at the end of the 1960s, after the mass mobilizations and passage of key civil rights laws. As Howard Winant argues, this period has been marked by both racial tolerance and backlash. See Winant, *The New Politics of Race: Globalism, Difference, Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 20–22, 97–100.

9 I use the controversial term "blaxploitation" in this essay nonjudgmentally to describe these films because they were so described in industry discourse at the time and since.

10 Collette Wood, "Blast H'Wood 'All-White' Hiring," *Hollywood Reporter*, March 14, 1969; and Will Tusher, "PUSH Study Shows Systematic Blackout of Blacks Continues," *Hollywood Reporter*, November 8, 1972.

11 *Daily Variety*, "Statement of EEOC's Steiner," March 14, 1969.

12 Robert Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 88.

13 *Daily Variety*, "Statement of EEOC's Steiner." See also A. D. Murphy, "Gov't Charges: Pix Discriminate in Jobs," *Daily Variety*, March 14, 1969.

14 See Dan Knapp, "An Assessment of the Status of Hollywood Blacks," *Los Angeles Times*, September 28, 1969.

the industry. Though the agreement did create a short-term rise in black employment, the dispute was, according to *Variety*, “resolved in a manner sought by the industry.”¹⁵ Thus, when the blaxploitation cycle emerged, it was still a white-dominated industry that moved quickly to capitalize.

Super Fly was, in several important respects, no exception: it was distributed by major studio Warner Bros. and made by a white producer, Sigismond Shore. With rentals of \$6.4 million and a break-even figure to be recouped by Warner of \$2.5 million, *Super Fly* generated about \$4 million in clear profit.¹⁶ Shore got the biggest payoff of any individual, claiming in a *Variety* interview that he negotiated himself a 40 percent profit share.¹⁷ One journalist described him as “[lighting] up like downtown Las Vegas at the mention of *Super Fly* and immediately [converting] into a veritable human computer spilling out amazing gross figures.”¹⁸ But *Super Fly*’s black creative workers also did well. The film was directed by an African American (only three short years after the first ever black director of a studio release) and was also scripted by an African American, Phillip Fenty.¹⁹ Because there was no advance money to pay actors and makers a salary, “almost everyone got part of the *Super Fly* action.”²⁰ Reports suggest that the black director Parks and star Ron O’Neal divided a 10 percent cut of profits—clearly much less than Shore, though still amounting to a very substantial sum for an independent production at the time.²¹ If we include the massive additional revenue generated by the film’s sound track, Curtis Mayfield was by far the best-remunerated African American on the project. Earnings from performance rights and royalties fed back to Mayfield because he owned his own publishing company and independent record label, Curtom Records, founded in 1963.²² The hit singles “Super Fly” and “Freddie’s Dead” both sold more than one million copies, and the crossover sound track album went on to shift a colossal twelve million units. Mayfield ultimately earned more than \$5 million for this sound track music—perhaps surpassing even Shore’s profits.²³

But the most striking advances in black industry participation achieved by *Super Fly* concerned its funding arrangements and behind-the-camera employment. The film, as reported by *Variety*, set two racial precedents in mainstream American filmmaking: the first major-distributed film to be financed predominantly by black limited partnerships

15 “Justice Backed Down on ‘Race,’” *Variety*, April 8, 1970; and Dave Kaufman, “More Pic-TV Jobs for Minorities,” *Daily Variety*, April 1, 1970.

16 Figure from Addison Verrill, “‘Super Fly’ a Blackbuster Phenom.; Gross Already Tops \$5,000,000 in Limited Dates,” *Variety*, October 4, 1972.

17 Hank Werba, “‘Super Fly’ B. O. Bonanza Cues Fast Sequel as Producer, Others Cash In,” *Daily Variety*, January 19, 1973.

18 Lois Baumoel, “Producer and Star of ‘Super Fly’ Are Interviewed in Cleveland,” *Boxoffice*, October 9, 1972.

19 The first black Hollywood director of the sound era was Gordon Parks Sr. with *The Learning Tree* (1969).

20 Baumoel, “Producer and Star.”

21 Verrill, “‘Super Fly’ a Blackbuster Phenom.”; and Werba, “‘Super Fly’ B. O. Bonanza.”

22 See Robert Pruter, “Curtom Records,” chap. 13 in *Chicago Soul* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

23 Figures from Chuck Phillips, “Cruel Twist to a Comeback Dream,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 26, 1990; and Werba, “‘Super Fly’ B. O. Bonanza.”

and the first to have a largely nonwhite technical crew.²⁴ The filmmakers went directly to the Harlem business community (the milieu of the film's setting) to raise the initial production costs. Small business investors—led by two black dentists, Connie Jenkins and Ed Allen—supplied a good deal of the front money of approximately \$100,000 (estimates vary).²⁵ Gordon Parks Sr., father of the director, also contributed \$5,000 of these initial costs.²⁶ Such black sources of film funding had long been in short supply. With little investment capital, African Americans were wary of bankrolling film projects, as Ossie Davis explained at the time: “Black capitalists, having no firm capitalist base from which to operate, tend to be exceedingly conservative with their money.”²⁷

If *Super Fly*'s funding arrangements were remarkable, they also had important consequences. The agenda of the film's bankrollers, none of whom had ever before invested in film, differed sharply from that of conventional industry sources of capitalization. One of their demands was to press for labor redistribution behind the camera.²⁸ *Super Fly* was therefore able to push for another filmic precedent of employing a majority black and Puerto Rican crew.²⁹ As a nonunion production, *Super Fly*'s makers recruited aggressively among New York's minority groups, with many technicians and apprentices coming from Third World Cinema Corporation, the Harlem-based collective that Ossie Davis cofounded in 1971 to increase black and Puerto Rican employment in the media industries.

Furthermore, because the film was independently financed, it was shopped to Warner Bros. only after completion. By withstanding “attempts by some of the majors to get in on the ground floor,” *Super Fly*'s makers had a high degree of creative autonomy, avoiding the external interference of studio representatives whose approval is normally required at each stage of production.³⁰ From conception down to final cut, then, Parks, Shore, and Fenty were basically free to craft their story about subcultural Harlem life.

The local black investors also enabled an unusual degree of access for location shooting. With their business clout and community ties, they secured what one *Variety* title described as “*Super Fly*'s Happy Harlem Stay.” While *Shaft's Big Score* and *Come Back Charleston Blue*, both financed by major studios, were being forced to re-create Uptown elsewhere following security problems, *Super Fly* “quietly wound eight weeks of almost all-Harlem locationing with no trouble whatsoever.”³¹ The investors guaranteed its safe passage, providing the conditions for the film's celebrated scenes of craps

24 Addison Verrill, “‘Super Fly's’ Happy Harlem Stay; Crew Black and Hispanic; Financing, Script, Director, PR All Black,” *Variety*, April 12, 1972.

25 Ibid.; and Archer Winsten, “Rages and Outrages,” *New York Post*, August 28, 1972.

26 See “One Last Deal: A Retrospective,” *Super Fly* DVD (Warner Home Video, 2004).

27 Davis quoted in Walter Price Burrell, “Ossie Davis Directs Anti-Drug Movie,” *Black Stars*, June 1973, 68.

28 Ronald Gold, “Harlem Film Fund Bumpy,” *Variety*, May 24, 1972; and Verrill, “‘Super Fly's’ Happy Harlem Stay.”

29 One important exception was first-time cinematographer James Signorelli.

30 Verrill, “‘Super Fly's’ Happy Harlem Stay.”

31 Ibid. See also Gold, “Harlem Film Fund Bumpy.”

games, eateries, and tenement blocks, which, according to Tom Doherty, had “never been rendered on screen with such matter-of-fact confidence before.”³² Donald Bogle agrees: “*Super Fly* looks authentic: the Harlem settings, the streets and alleyways, the bars, and the tenements all paint an overriding bleak vision of urban decay,” which was “new terrain for commercial cinema” (Figure 1).³³

Figure 1. Eddie (Carl Lee) plays craps in one of *Super Fly*'s celebrated vérité scenes (Warner Bros., 1972).

Furnishing further “authenticity,” some investors actually appeared as characters in the film. Most notably, Harlem street player KC plays a pimp, and his ostentatious black Cadillac El Dorado features prominently as the hero's car (“My El-D and just me / for all junkies to see,” croons Mayfield on “Pusherman”). Nate Adams, who plays a dealer and served as the film's lauded costume designer, owned a Harlem employment agency that recruited personnel for the film. Harlemites traveled into the diegesis, materializing connections to the local black business community it portrayed. In several important ways, then, the black financing of the film directly facilitated the racial redistribution of labor behind the camera and the content of the black images in front of it.

However, it would be misleading to construct black creative input as in any simple way authentic. As with much of the black participation in blaxploitation films, *Super Fly*'s African American writer and director were not from the places they portrayed. Indeed, ironically, it was only the white producer who hailed from Harlem. Fenty was a hot-shot Cleveland advertising executive before writing *Super Fly* in his late twenties. He was part of the new hip marketing culture of the 1960s that Thomas Frank chronicles in *The Conquest of Cool*, which grasped “the vast popularity of dissidence.”³⁴ He admits that he “knew not much about” the Harlem scene, but had noted the “tremendous creative energy” of this “exciting, interesting subculture.”³⁵ Parks's professional journey before *Super Fly* encompassed art school in Paris and working with documentary maker Pierre Gaisseau (“the real influence of [his] life”), who made a film about the natives

32 Doherty, “Black Exploitation Picture,” 35.

33 Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 3rd ed. (New York: Continuum, 1997), 239–240. See also Massood, *Black City Cinema*, 101–107; and Peter Stanfield, “Walking the Streets: Black Gangsters and the ‘Abandoned City’ in the 1970s Blaxploitation Cycle,” in *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the American Gangster Film*, ed. Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnet, and Peter Stanfield (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 296–297.

34 Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 13.

35 Phillip Fenty interview in “One Last Deal.”

of New Guinea before, according to Parks, “pondering Harlem.”³⁶ Parks had also just finished working as a stills photographer on *The Godfather* (by far the most successful film of 1972), which powerfully mythologized illegal white, ethnic enterprise culture.³⁷ Growing up in Harlem and the Bronx, producer Shore was, according to one journalist, “familiar and sympathetic with the problems of the ghetto foreign-born, black and minority groups.”³⁸ He described his own fascination with “the way [blacks] got into being hustlers on the street.” Unlike white hustlers, “it was a competition of style.”³⁹

By combining the advertiser’s and documentarian’s eye—overseen by “White Negro” Shore—Fenty and Parks capitalized on the immense currency of black (and white ethnic) urban culture in the early 1970s.⁴⁰ This was a period of proliferating ethnographies and press features on “the ghetto.”⁴¹ The “authentic Negro culture” in these accounts comprised, as historian Robin Kelley describes wryly, “the young jobless men hanging out on the corner passing the bottle, the brothers with the nastiest verbal repertoires, the pimps and hustlers”—the very types that came to be further mythologized in blaxploitation films.⁴² White commentators were busy chronicling and exoticizing urban communities for mainly white and middle-class consumption. The creators of *Super Fly* responded by constructing their own less passive version of ghetto masculinity that catered primarily to black appetites, but that also appealed to a receptive secondary white youth audience.

Super Fly thus emerges as an interracial production that was far from an unmediated slice of ghetto life. Shore controlled the film package and Warner controlled the film’s distribution. Parks Jr. and Fenty were hardly portraying their own life experiences. Furthermore, the film’s minority employment was itself indirectly funded by Great Society-style programs. Third World Cinema, which trained *Super Fly* technicians, had received a Manpower Career and Development Administration grant (\$200,000) and a Model Cities grant (\$400,000) in the year prior to *Super Fly*’s making.⁴³

The film’s marketing campaign captured both the film’s authentically local dimensions and its deliberate commodification of “ghetto authenticity.” Studios typically hired African American public relations and advertising companies to market blaxploitation films; in the case of *Super Fly*, Warner hired James Booker Associates. Prior to the film’s release, screenings were held, according to one Booker executive, “not for the kind of cultural elite usually found on those white ‘opinion makers’ advance

36 Parks quoted in Winsten, “Rages and Outrages.”

37 On *The Godfather*’s blockbuster success, see Peter Krämer, *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), 8–37.

38 Baumel, “Producer and Star of ‘Super Fly.’”

39 Shore quoted in David Mills, “Blaxploitation 101,” *Washington Post*, November 4, 1990.

40 “White Negro” is Norman Mailer’s famous term for white male exoticized attraction to black cool, in his *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: Putnam, 1959).

41 See for instance Ulf Hannerz, *Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).

42 Robin Kelley, *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 20.

43 Figures from Patterson, “Interview with Ossie Davis,” 44; and James Monaco, *American Film Now: The People, the Power, the Money, the Movies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 194.

screening lists at the majors, but for Harlem bartenders, hairdressers, barbers and street people who have immediate impact within the black community.” This strategy proved very effective, for it took just eight weeks for the film’s gross to exceed \$1 million in two New York theaters alone.⁴⁴ Since the film was unusually embedded in the urban enclave it represented, the employment of black marketers and recourse to local opinion makers is consistent with its production principles—preferable to the alternative of relying on white outsiders. At the same time, however, such a selling strategy enhanced the film’s image of ghetto realness, which helped maximize interest among its youth audience of both blacks and whites.

Film scholars have tended to stress white involvement and control in blaxploitation films like *Super Fly*. Mark Reid has influentially argued that early 1970s black action films created a false image of racial self-determination. Behind the “mythology of black control,” projected in film narratives and marketing campaigns, were the white executives and entrepreneurs pulling the strings.⁴⁵ Robert Weems concurs, arguing that, by using black PR outfits (like James Booker), the majors (like Warner) could gain closer access to the community, maximize profits, and forward a rhetoric of racial autonomy.⁴⁶ These scholars take issue not just with studio films like *Shaft*, but also independently made films with major distribution like *Super Fly*. As Reid explains, “a black filmmaker may alter his script to aim for distribution by major studios” in order to achieve a wide release.⁴⁷ Even though the studio had no direct involvement in the scripting, shooting, or editing of *Super Fly*, its commercial expectations were already built into the narrative through the filmmakers’ preconceptions.

Reid’s and Weems’s arguments are persuasive and well supported. However, the danger is that, within this interpretive frame, the vast majority of black-made and black-themed films are interpreted as disempowering, compromised by market exigencies. The power of this critique has curtailed consideration of concrete opportunities created during the blaxploitation production trend. This critical tendency is symptomatic of a broader trend in civil rights and black power historiography that Nancy MacLean has identified. The focus on “climactic confrontations has drawn attention away from quieter struggles on other fronts—above all, from the fight to secure access to good jobs.”⁴⁸ In blaxploitation scholarship, this focus has led to an emphasis on the polemical reception of the films rather than on pragmatic struggles over black participation behind the camera.

Some scholars of black film have proposed more flexible frameworks for studying race relations in the film industry. Thomas Cripps argues that, historically, practically

44 Booker executive quoted in and figure from Verrill, “‘Super Fly’ a Blackbuster Phenom.” See also B. J. Mason, “The New Films: Culture or Con Game?” *Ebony*, December 1972, 62.

45 Mark Reid, “The Black Action Film: The End of the Patiently Enduring Black Hero,” *Film History* 2, no. 1 (1988): 35–36. Reid does note employment “opportunities” created by black action films, but does not elaborate (23, 34). See also his “Black Action Film,” chap. 4 in *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

46 Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar*, chap. 5.

47 Reid, “Black Action Film,” 30.

48 Nancy MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 5.

all black films relied in some measure on “white sources of capital, distributors, bookers, and exhibitors.” This recognition requires a “broadened view of black cinema” that reflects both the complexity of this capital-intensive industry and of racial interaction in the United States.⁴⁹ In a similar vein, Tommy Lott contends that scholars like Reid present “too rigid a dichotomy between independent and studio films.” In post-civil rights black filmmaking, there is, he argues, “less disparity between the film practices of black independents and black filmmaking in Hollywood.”⁵⁰

However, even Cripps and Lott rebuff *Super Fly*. In passing, Lott describes the film as one of a “deluge of formulaic studio productions,” and Cripps has called it *Sweetback’s* “Hollywood epigone.”⁵¹ Given the black dimensions of its making, it seems curious that the film should be so described. But a look next at the brand of black business culture in its narrative helps to explain the critical diffidence.

Representing Black Enterprise. In the “message movies” of the postwar years, the theme of race prejudice was frequently dramatized through stories of black exclusion from, and attempts to enter, the economic mainstream.⁵² The liberal reformism of films like *No Way Out* (Joseph Mankiewicz, 1950), *A Raisin in the Sun* (Daniel Petrie, 1964), and *Nothing but a Man* (Michael Roemer, 1964) focused on the social and psychological burden on black men caused by occupying subservient positions in employment and/or the economy. Following civil rights victories, Sidney Poitier’s hugely influential late-sixties protagonists were consummate professionals: a doctor (*Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, Stanley Kramer, 1967), homicide detective (*In the Heat of the Night*, Norman Jewison, 1967), and teacher (*To Sir, with Love*, James Clavell, 1967), outshining and often commanding higher salaries than their white counterparts. These stories of professional integration privileged the newfound status of an isolated “racial exception,” precariously positioned in a white-dominated world of work. Although they mobilized themes of employment and status, none of these liberal-era films dealt seriously with black business culture.⁵³ Nor indeed did pre-*Super Fly* blaxploitation. In *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, the beset black detectives work hard for their modest public sector salaries, while the hustling preacher’s attempts at underground wealth creation ultimately amount to cowardly extortion. *Sweetback’s* currency is sex, not money. Shaft does have his own detective agency, but narrative emphasis rests on his individualist sleuthing (he has no staff) at least one step removed from the black community.

There is an obvious reflectionist explanation for the filmic underrepresentation of African American business: the historic, real-world lack of black entrepreneurs and

49 Thomas Cripps, *Black Film as Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 6–7.

50 Tommy Lott, “Hollywood and Independent Black Cinema,” in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1999), 211.

51 Ibid., 214; Thomas Cripps, “*Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* and the Changing Politics of Genre,” in *Close Viewings: An Anthology of New Film Criticism*, ed. Peter Lehman (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1990), 241.

52 See Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

53 Ralph Cooper’s “race film” *Dark Manhattan* (1937) is the closest progenitor to blaxploitation’s subcultural entrepreneurialism. See Jonathan Munby, “The Underworld Films of Oscar Micheaux and Ralph Cooper: Toward a Genealogy of the Black Screen Gangster,” in Grieveson, Sonnet, and Stanfield, *Mob Culture*, 263–280.

managers. In their influential investigation of racial inequality, sociologists Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro explore the shortage of self-employment and wealth generation opportunities in black America.⁵⁴ They argue that the wealth gap (rather than more frequently studied income differentials) is the deepest indicator of material inequality. Sociologists Lawrence Bobo and Ryan Smith concur: “The gaping disparity in accumulated wealth is the real inequality in standard of living produced by three hundred plus years of systematic and pervasive racial discrimination.”⁵⁵

In pop-cultural terms, *Super Fly* engages this crucial terrain—albeit through the socially harmful drug trade. It narrativizes barriers to and adaptive chances for black enterprise, portraying the predicaments and mindsets of black underground workers through its four main drug-dealing protagonists: Youngblood Priest (Ron O’Neal), Eddie (Carl Lee), Scatter (Julius Harris), and Freddie (Charles McGregor). The narrative centers on Priest in his attempt to pull off a huge \$1 million drug deal so that he can “get out” of the business. He and business partner Eddie started from nothing and have expanded their operation impressively. As commentators James Parish and George Hill summarize, Priest and Eddie have “fifty men out on the New York City street all pushing dope (mostly to white people).”⁵⁶ Through these stylish and adept black entrepreneurs, the film stages the circumvention of historic restrictions on African American economic agency. As Oliver and Shapiro explore, white consumer prejudice, combined with discriminatory state and local policies, wrought a “devastating impact on the ability of blacks to build and maintain successful enterprises.”⁵⁷ *Super Fly* dramatically flips this racial script.

In a striking sequence partway through the film, a three-minute montage of split-screen stills depicts the distribution, sale, and consumption of cocaine, propelled by the backbeat of Mayfield’s “Pusherman.” It is markedly multiracial, showing the interaction of blacks, whites, and Asians; but generally blacks are selling to whites from all walks of life (business executives, construction workers, etc.). Cocaine is constructed as a hip, prestige product (in implicit contrast to heroin), enhancing the dealer’s image. As historian William Van Deburg explains, blaxploitation’s “heroic hustlers . . . took considerable pride in the corporate structures and complex distribution networks they created, and fought vigorously to maintain their share of a very specialized market.”⁵⁸ The high-stakes entrepreneurialism of Priest—who penetrates white markets, generates minority jobs, and operates above the law—constituted a highly pleasurable, if dangerous, signifier of black pride and success.

Along with interracial trade, *Super Fly* offered a window into black intergenerational investment. Priest turns to his mentor and father-figure Scatter for help to pull

54 Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

55 Lawrence Bobo and Ryan Smith, “From Jim Crow Racism to Laissez-Faire Racism: The Transformation of Racial Attitudes,” in *Beyond Pluralism: The Conception of Groups and Identities in America*, ed. Wendy Katkin, Ned Landsman, and Andrea Tyree (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 183.

56 James Parish and George Hill, *Black Action Films* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1989), 290.

57 Oliver and Shapiro, *Black Wealth*, 4.

58 William Van Deburg, *Black Camelot: African American Culture Heroes in Their Times, 1960–1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 140.

off his big score. Scatter is a former drug distributor who had got Priest started in the business. Now a legitimate small businessman, Scatter reluctantly agrees to help. He is willing to risk everything for his protégé because he understands the crucial importance of passing on resources to the next generation. As Eddie remarks incredulously to Priest, “You want that man to give up the little time he got left and lay it on the line for you. And you know he *wanted* to do it for you!” Scatter has a hard-won appreciation of the fact that “family assets expand choices, horizons, and opportunities for children,” which can counteract what Oliver and Shapiro call the “socially layered accumulation of disadvantages.”⁵⁹ Scatter describes Priest’s underworld apprenticeship as an alternative schooling: “I gave you one scholarship, Youngblood. No one ever gave me nothing.” Facing death near the film’s end, with his property and capital now of no use to him, he switches to third person: “All the money Scatter done made.” Racial oppression deepens the family melodrama, with real pathos in Scatter’s sacrifice for his “son.”

Much of the film’s narrative tension rests on the different identities and perspectives of business partners Priest and Eddie (Figure 2). Priest sees the underground economy as a route to mainstream success, expressing an individualist desire for freedom. Asked

Figure 2. Business partners Priest (Ron O'Neal) and Eddie (Carl Lee) clash over worldviews (Warner Bros., 1972).

what he would do afterwards: “It’s not so much what I’d do as having the choice. Not being forced into a thing because that’s the way it is.” He rejects the menial jobs available: “working some jive job for chump change, day after day. If that’s all I’m supposed to do then they’re gon’ have to kill me, ’cause that ain’t enough.” Priest’s climactic speech, in which he triumphs financially and rhetorically over the white drug kingpin / police commissioner, is an exhilarating rap, beginning, “You don’t own

me, pig!” Priest emerges as a hip rendering of the American individualist hero, ready to seize post-civil rights opportunity. His crossover bootstrap charisma certainly excited white film critics at the time. For the *New York Times*’s Vincent Canby, Priest “succeeds in his last big deal, rather gloriously”; another reviewer described him as “downright glamorous”; and a third—more problematically—admired his “smoldering, virile presence.”⁶⁰

By contrast, ghettocentric Eddie views the underground economy as an end in itself. Tension arises because he sees no reason to terminate their drug-dealing operation.

59 Oliver and Shapiro, *Black Wealth*, 6–7.

60 Vincent Canby, “All but ‘Super Fly’ Fall Down,” *New York Times*, November 12, 1972; Review of “Super Fly,” *Motion Picture Herald*, September 1972, in *Super Fly* clippings file, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; and Kevin Thomas, “Dope Dealer Who’s in a Fix,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 20, 1972.

Eddie's limited horizons express a self-conscious internalization of racial inequality: "That honky's using me," he says of their white drug wholesaler. "So what? You know, I'm glad he's using me. . . . People been using me all my life." Eddie's vernacular insight into exploitative dynamics shows a keen awareness of oppressive social relations. When Eddie finally betrays his partner, it may appear to be a simple act of treacherous shortsightedness. (Mayfield's chastising track title is "Eddie You Should Know Better.") But the vicious circle of social constraint and low expectation mires Eddie in ways that have more salience than the clear-sighted aspiration of Priest. With his grittier intonation, he provides a more credible version of the black hustling hero.

In the film's most quoted speech, Eddie describes the good life they have achieved: "You're gonna give all this up? Eight-track stereo, color TV in every room, and can snort half a piece of dope every day. That's the American dream, nigga! Well, ain't it?" Explaining the subcultural logic of black hustlers, Robin Kelley sheds light on Eddie's outlook: "Possessing capital was not the ultimate goal; rather, money was primarily a means by which hustlers could avoid wage work and negotiate status through the purchase of prestigious commodities."⁶¹ Eddie's consumer desire does not amount to the long-term accumulation of mainstream mores. His speech provides insights into the structural determination of his worldview, at the same time as it reveals, through his possessions, language, and activities, the resistive styles and seductive pleasures of "the life."

Super Fly's pronounced entrepreneurial imagination invites a reexamination of the role of Curtis Mayfield's sound track. This hugely popular score was, according to leading music critic Nelson George, "arguably, the single greatest black pop effort of the decade." With its lyrical complexity, vocal sincerity, and instrumental dynamism of guitars, horns, and flutes, it is usually read as "at odds" with the film it supports.⁶² This interpretation was first proposed in the film's pressbook ("a counter balance") and most famously elaborated by Greil Marcus ("not background, but criticism").⁶³ The subtitle of Christopher Sieving's article offers a recent, scholarly iteration of the idea: "Song Score as Counter-Narration in *Super Fly*." In this detailed account, Sieving does, however, suggest that Mayfield's lyrics partly work to justify the individualist actions of Priest.⁶⁴ Extending Sieving's suggestion, I would argue that textual and extratextual evidence strongly indicate that Mayfield's music enhanced the film's entrepreneurial energies, and that this was in many ways intentional on the musician's part.

Mayfield wrote the music as he spent time on the set. "Pusherman," which according to one commentator was "blasting from every radio and sound system in black America in 1972," is performed within the film by the Curtis Mayfield Experience

61 Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!* 20.

62 Nelson George, *Blackface: Reflections on African Americans and the Movies* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 34, 54.

63 *Super Fly* Pressbook (Warner Bros., 1972); Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock'n'Roll Music* (New York: Omnibus Press, 1977), 97. Mayfield's consistent critique of drug use in his *Super Fly* lyrics (and interviews) has encouraged commentators to conclude that he is simply antidrug. But such conclusions overlook the crucial distinction between drug use and drug dealing in Mayfield's subtle and ranging elaborations of the drug trope.

64 Sieving, "Super Sonics," 82–84.

(Figure 3).⁶⁵ When Mayfield's pusherman intones, "Feed me money for style / and I'll let you trip for a while," he seems to be invoking the "hustle" of the black filmic / musical experience itself. The lyrics of this track tend to emphasize structure over agency, mitigating the drug dealer's role: he is "a victim of ghetto demands." While "Pusherman" is an ambivalent track that works both to parody and legitimate black (sub)cultural enterprise, the hit single "Super Fly" contains little irony. Instead, it readily mystifies hustling masculinity: "Hard to understand, what a hell of a man / This cat of the slum, had a mind, wasn't dumb." More often overlooked is the "triumphant optimism," as one music journalist put it, of the chorus to "No Thing on Me (Cocaine Song)"—admittedly an antidrug track.⁶⁶

Figure 3. Director Gordon Parks Jr. and performer/composer Curtis Mayfield on the set of *Super Fly* (Warner Bros., 1972).

Heard just after Scatter has agreed to help Priest, Mayfield sings, "I'm so glad I've got my own, so glad that I can see / My life's a natural high, the man can't put no thing on me." In his voice-over commentary on the *Super Fly* DVD, black film scholar Todd Boyd describes the exhilarating resonance of this music-dominated film sequence, reciting these lines in full and twice over. For Boyd, they express the idea that "the system

can't control me because I have my own," thus encapsulating the film's advocacy of "self-determination and independence."⁶⁷

In a 1971 interview, Mayfield himself drew parallels between hustling enterprise and his own music production. Reflecting on his celebrated record label Curtom in the year before he wrote the *Super Fly* score, he said, "As an independent company I think we will be just as strong if not stronger than a great many of the big companies simply because through an independent company you tend to get more true hustle." Why is black independent music production a "hustle"? "Simply because, well, that's my only bread, so I've got to push and go all the way with it, or lose out completely."⁶⁸ The longstanding scarcity of resources ("bread") feeds into the intensity of African American business practice and creative energy. This idea came to inform the film's ghetto-centric themes and grassroots production. Describing his own publishing company, Mayfield also prefigured his refrain, "I'm so glad I got my own": "It just had to happen . . . that we'd end up owning as much of ourselves as possible." As black culture scholar Mark Anthony Neal states in regard to this sound

65 Nathan McCall, *Makes Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 102.

66 David Mills, "Curtis Mayfield, Back with a 'Super Fly' Sound," *Washington Post*, September 23, 1990.

67 Boyd's comments cast doubt on Sieving's description of these lines as "relatively obscure," in "Super Sonics," 84.

68 Mayfield quoted in Richard Robinson, "Curtis Mayfield," in *International Dictionary of Black Composers*, vol. 2, ed. Samuel Floyd Jr. (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1999), 1104.

track, Mayfield “clearly represents the praxis of Black Power in both his music and his business dealings.”⁶⁹ Post-release, despite intense criticism of the film and his own growing misgivings about its glamorization of drug use, Mayfield still maintained that “*Super Fly* did have its positive side. It was the first movie where a black dude actually got over.”⁷⁰ By using the language of his famous “Super Fly” refrain (“tryin’ to get over”), this politically conscious artist refused to sidestep parallels between black entrepreneurialism in the film narrative, sound track lyrics, and the circumstances of the music’s production.

Through sound and vision, then, *Super Fly* mythologized the outlook and practices of aspirational, working-class black men. The film reworked action genre conventions to speak to black interests and expectations,⁷¹ staging the injuries of the racial wealth gap and the turn to alternative opportunity structures to gain status and cash. According to Lindsay Patterson, one of the few black film critics to praise *Super Fly* on its release, “the movie presented an important message about the failure of American society to freely provide legitimate opportunities for its bright but impoverished young black men.”⁷²

By dramatizing barriers to legitimate advancement, however, the pusherman’s exploitative trade is rendered morally conscionable and even admirable. The social critique mounted through the film’s realist images of urban poverty and disinvestment, Mayfield’s lyrics (above all, “Little Child Runnin’ Wild”), and the insights of Eddie, Scatter, and Priest does not prompt collectivist solutions. Instead, the film sanctions and enhances the hustler’s individualism. Its most enduring contribution may well be its mitigation and mystification of the black entrepreneurial hustler figure. Once again, ghetto philosopher Eddie crystallizes this position: “I know it’s a rotten game, but it’s the only one the man left us to play.” Beneath the seeming straightforwardness of this justification of drug dealing are complex political currents premised on the rejection and rearticulation of both civil rights and black power mobilization.

Super Fly’s Post-Civil Rights Politics. As a pop-cultural site for the production and circulation of black political identities, *Super Fly* must be taken very seriously indeed. Of all the blaxploitation films viewed avidly by black youth, *Super Fly* elicited the most keen identification, enjoying extremely high levels of repeat business.⁷³ It was a runaway hit in black theaters and grossed more than \$12 million.⁷⁴ The title of a December 1972 *Jet* magazine cover story asked how *Super Fly* was changing the “behavior of blacks.”⁷⁵ Ethnographer Mary Pattillo-McCoy found that the film “consumed” black

69 Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 53.

70 Mayfield quoted in Philips, “Cruel Twist.”

71 Harry Benshoff has productively explored such genre rearticulation, in “Blaxploitation Horror Films: Generic Reappropriation or Reinscription?” *Cinema Journal* 39, no. 2 (Winter 2000): 31–50.

72 Lindsay Patterson, ed., *Black Films and Film-makers* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1975), x.

73 Verrill, “‘Super Fly’ a Blackbuster Phenom.”

74 Figure from Bob Johnson, “Black Films Popular in Chicago’s Loop,” *Boxoffice*, April 14, 1975.

75 William Berry, “How ‘Super Fly’ Film Is Changing Behavior of Blacks,” *Jet*, December 28, 1972, 1, 54–58.

youth. "I grew up with *Super Fly*," recalls interviewee Lauren Grant. "That picture had a profound effect on my life."⁷⁶ In his autobiography, black journalist Nathan McCall agrees, asserting that the film "influenced the style, thinking, and choices that a lot of young black men began making around that time. I know it deeply affected me."⁷⁷ Nelson George found it "mesmerizing": "*Super Fly*'s cocaine dealer was a . . . romantic, conflicted figure whose slang and clothes cut deeper than *Shaft* into the black community's psyche."⁷⁸ Black filmmaker Warrington Hudlin remembers his first viewing in East St. Louis: "At the climax . . . the entire theater, including myself, leapt to our feet and stood, and screamed, and applauded, and stamped our feet. . . . It connected psychically with a people at a certain place and time."⁷⁹

The film connected in terms of both realism and fantasy, drawing on competing codes of recognition from cinematic genres, media representation, black subcultures, and social experience.⁸⁰ Many black fans, new to cinematic representations of their communities, spoke of the film's authenticity: "Super Fly is what's happening right here on the street," commented one girl in Washington, DC. "That's the way it is." At the same time, many identified with the film as an enticing fantasy, with another viewer declaring, "Priest is super fine and super bad."⁸¹ Given the intensity of its audience appeal in a period of racial and political flux, *Super Fly* was striking in its potential to influence black youth attitudes.

The film narrative assuredly presented a rebuke to traditional racial integrationism. Classic civil rights mobilization had been built, as Nancy MacLean describes it, on "the belief that those who worked hard at honest callings, whatever their origins, could better themselves and lift their children's prospects."⁸² Popular culture was seen to play a vital role in this quest for black inclusion through the projection of progressive stories about black life and race relations. By romanticizing black criminal occupations and alternative lifestyles, *Super Fly* was seen as extremely detrimental to such a project. It risked reinforcing some of the very negative stereotypes that had long been imposed on African Americans, and that were gaining new ground with the mighty rise of "culture of poverty" discourses from the late 1960s onwards.⁸³

But from *Super Fly*'s more pessimistic post-civil rights perspective, promises of decent jobs for black people ready to work at "honest callings" were not being kept. The pervasive liberal discourses of rights and opportunities proved empty and even detrimental for many poor and working-class blacks with rising expectations in a

76 Mary Pattillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 126.

77 McCall, *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, 102.

78 George, *Blackface*, 30, 54.

79 Hudlin interview in "One Last Deal."

80 *Super Fly*'s powerful combination of realism and fantasy was noted on its release in, for instance, "Catholic Office 'C' on WB's 'Super Fly,'" *Variety*, August 23, 1972. See also Doherty, "Black Exploitation Picture," 35; and Masood, *Black City Cinema*, 105–107.

81 As quoted in Charles Michener, "Black Movies," *Newsweek*, October 23, 1972.

82 MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough*, 6.

83 On the "culture of poverty," see Stephen Steinberg, *Turning Back: The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 5–10, 119–123.

dwindling job market. It is a painful irony that by the time Johnson's War on Poverty got underway, recession and economic restructuring had begun to eliminate entry-level job opportunities, all but rendering obsolete the new training and support on offer. The Kerner Commission, set up to investigate the causes of the explosive unrest of the 1960s, found that a key cause was joblessness.⁸⁴ *Super Fly*'s profane glamorization of black *dishonest* callings dramatized widespread feelings of cynicism and anger.

More surprisingly, *Super Fly* also rebuked black power activism. In a pivotal scene, three "black militants" approach Priest and Eddie and challenge them to give something back to the community: "We're out here trying to build a new nation for black people. It's time for you to start paying some *dues*!" Priest's response comes off as far more virile, eloquent, and even militant, as he offers his allegiance only when they start "killing whitey": "until you can do that, go sing your marching songs somewhere else." Begrudgingly impressed, the militants retreat. This scene has been lambasted. Scholar William Lyne, for example, laments that, "as they leave with their tails between their legs, the 'militants' have not only bowed to Priest's superior masculinity, they have also relinquished any claims on effective resistance."⁸⁵ Film critic Pauline Kael denounced Priest's exultant dismissal, "calculated to crush the finky, cowardly pair."⁸⁶ After *Super Fly*'s release, Black Panther leader Huey Newton complained that black action films "leave revolution out or, if it's in, they make it look stupid and naïve."⁸⁷ The classic black nationalist mission was to mobilize the hustler, to convert cynicism into radicalism. Newton describes the Black Panther mandate: "to transform many of the so-called criminal activities going on in the street into something political."⁸⁸ *Super Fly* reverses this transformationist narrative by channeling political energies toward hustling individualism. By constructing the militants as just another interest group on the take, the film is deeply undermining of black power politics.

This scene is partly legible in terms of the early 1970s ebbing of the black nationalist tide. Widespread grassroots radicalism came up against an intractable and increasingly resentful white America that had no appetite to deliver de facto racial equality. As sociologist Howard Winant summarizes, "The result was that the movement's relatively manageable demands were incorporated within the status quo, while its radical demands for social justice and black power—with their disruptive, participatory, and redistributive content—were systematically rejected."⁸⁹ The discrepancy between the militants' far-reaching vision and their shrinking constituency begins to explain the context of Priest's narrowly economic notion of self-determination.

But the question remains, why would the filmmakers choose to promote these currents of backlash, especially given the production's substantially black-determined enterprise? After all, nationalist politics, though increasingly fragmented, were still vital

84 Kerner Commission, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York: Bantam, 1968).

85 Lyne, "No Accident," 43.

86 Pauline Kael, "Notes on Black Movies," *New Yorker*, December 1972, reprinted in Patterson, *Black Films*, 263.

87 Newton quoted in Michener, "Black Movies."

88 Huey Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Ballantine, 1973), 141.

89 Howard Winant, *The World Is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy Since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 302.

in urban neighborhoods in 1972. Furthermore, *Sweetback*, *Shaft*, and especially *The Mack* (Michael Campus, 1973) all opted to show a degree of collaboration between black individuals and activists. The answer that suggests itself is not pressure from Hollywood or white interests. Instead, it probably came down to competing Harlem business and political agendas. During shooting, *Super Fly*'s makers were approached by local political groups who demanded funding, jobs, and politically conscious imagery in exchange for access and protection.⁹⁰ Street gangs, according to actor Julius Harris, also "wanted their taste." The makers refused to "cough up. We were street cats too. We said no, no."⁹¹ Fenty and Parks incorporated these disputes into their flexible script, conflating activists and gangs in its figuring of "militants." Priest and Eddie thus emerge as stand-ins for the black investors and filmmakers dramatically refusing to pay their dues, politically and monetarily, in Harlem. The regrettable irony is that the only major-release film to come anywhere near the ambitious goal of "95% black crews on pictures made in the black community" demanded by Harlem activists should at the same time come to lampoon them.⁹²

Because of its flagrant repudiation of both incremental and transformative political agendas of the time, it is very hard to disagree with the widely held view that *Super Fly* was, in many ways, demobilizing. In terms of value frameworks, the film's celebration of black entrepreneurial individualism served to undermine communal action. Through its transmission of hip fashions, it encouraged consumerism among black youth audiences nationwide—including, most troublingly, drug consumption.⁹³ The film also influenced occupational choices. Evidence suggests that it enticed black youth into drug dealing. Along with Nathan McCall, Lauren Grant identifies the film as a key factor in her turn to dealing, when she "decided to stop mimicking the costumes and mannerisms of the movie characters in *Super Fly*, and instead started reproducing the behaviors of the actual drug dealers in her own environment."⁹⁴ Coupled with the push factors of unemployment and poverty, the film's glamorization of ghetto entrepreneurs pulled young people toward the drug business—the "black urban answer to capitalism," as McCall describes it.⁹⁵

Nonetheless, in several important ways, the film's groundbreaking depiction of black enterprise remains intensely political, resonating, in particular, with realigning discourses of economic self-determination. If there was "a black capitalism to fit almost any ideological predisposition" in the early 1970s, as Van Deburg puts it, all varieties of black capitalism stressed building up the black economic base, particularly

90 Verrill, "'Super Fly's' Happy Harlem Stay."

91 Harris interview in "One Last Deal."

92 Gold, "Harlem Film Fund Bumpy."

93 On *Super Fly* and drug consumption, which is beyond the remit of this article, see Alvin Poussaint, "Cheap Thrills That Degrade Blacks," *Psychology Today* 7 (February 1974): 22–26; and Will Tusher, "Current Black Films Scored for Free Dope Advertising," *Hollywood Reporter*, September 20, 1972. On *Super Fly*'s consumerist fashions, see Van Deburg, *Black Camelot*, 139, 141; Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar*, 84; and Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* (London: Routledge, 1997), 98–102.

94 Pattillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences*, 126.

95 McCall, *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, 102.

through the control of urban businesses.⁹⁶ This drive for entrepreneurialism had deep roots in the black struggle, notably Booker T. Washington's belief in business as an aid to community empowerment. In the early 1970s, and particularly in the second half of 1972, these political discourses traveled powerfully into the film industry.

By the year of *Super Fly*'s release and Nixon's landslide reelection victory, the serious drive to integrate Hollywood was being thwarted by political backpedaling. The expiration of the industry's two-year Justice Department agreement on minority employment targets stymied the black struggle for inclusion. Further, the expiration was accompanied by a discursive onslaught by Hollywood management against the black film protests that followed *Super Fly*'s release. In an influential official statement in September 1972, Jack Valenti, head of the Motion Picture Association of America, reduced the claims of blacks seeking film jobs to unfair demands for a handout. He advocated instead a laissez-faire approach to industry jobs. The title of a *Hollywood Reporter* cover story proclaimed, "Valenti Calls Blacks' Bluff; Rejects 'Special' Treatment."⁹⁷

With dissipating racial leverage, black film activists seized on business solutions. In late 1972, blaxploitation star Jim Brown, who founded the Black Economic Union, asserted that "[t]he one approach that will work is to approach movies as an industry, as a business. Black people must stop crying 'black' and start crying 'business.'"⁹⁸ Shortly after the *Super Fly* shoot, Roy Innis, the Harlem-based director of the Congress of Racial Equality and a key black capitalist proponent, turned his attention to film. He and Ossie Davis (an unlikely alliance, given Innis's support for Nixon's campaign) set up an organization to provide a voice "for people in Harlem to talk to the film industry." Their first priority was "to train more blacks for jobs."⁹⁹ When questioned about the danger of industry backlash, he responded, "They can't do it because we're 40 percent of the dollar. This is money. Those are capitalists. You can always deal with a capitalist with money."¹⁰⁰ In a trade article titled "Black Capitalism Big Factor in PUSH Drive on Hollywood," Jesse Jackson declared that black independent filmmaking was "stronger than a picket line." He promulgated a vision of "civil economics," "to cash in on civil rights at the cash register."¹⁰¹ This required combining any preferential treatment still available with the aggressive pursuit of black business interests.

In terms of film production alone, the primary reference point for these men was probably Van Peebles's independent hit *Sweetback*. But, in terms of combined production and narrative, *Super Fly* must surely have energized their business-oriented rhetoric. Indeed, in the Davis quotation that opens this article, it is hard to imagine

96 William Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965–1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 117.

97 Will Tusher, "Valenti Calls Blacks' Bluff; Rejects 'Special' Treatment," *Hollywood Reporter*, September 29, 1972.

98 Brown statement in *New York Times*, "Black Movie Boom—Good or Bad?" December 17, 1972. See also James Murray, "The Subject Is Money," in Patterson, *Black Films*, 247–257.

99 Gold, "Harlem Film Fund Bumpy."

100 Innis quoted in Mason, "New Films."

101 Will Tusher, "Black Capitalism Big Factor in PUSH Drive on Hollywood," *Hollywood Reporter*, September 18, 1972.

that the proposal to channel the “organizational ability” of “pimps and pushers” into film enterprise does not allude to this film. Youngblood Priest’s view that his own black entrepreneurialism was more effective than “marching songs” resonates with Jackson’s declaration that black film business was “stronger than a picket line.” Both comments reflect and reinforce a tactical capitulation to capitalism.

Of course, *Super Fly*’s narrative of drug dealing stands as a most damaging form of black capitalism. Innis himself, along with so many others, castigated *Super Fly*, stating, “I object to the justification of dope-pushing. . . . These movies are anti-struggle, anti-revolutionary (so-called Black revolutionaries are usually portrayed as bungling idiots), and anti-direct involvement.”¹⁰² However, once we have taken account of the backstory of the film’s making, the historic barriers to black entrepreneurial opportunity, the film’s subversion of business norms, and the increasingly pessimistic course of black/white relations in the early 1970s, *Super Fly* emerges as a problematic but deeply resonant enunciation of business aspiration.

Indeed, as this article has argued, the film narrative serves as an allegory for black pop-cultural production itself. A compelling parallel emerges between partners Priest and Eddie and their fifty-strong foot soldiers in front of the camera and the film’s black makers Parks and Fenty and their Third World apprentices—behind the camera. Neither side of the filmmaking equation had been represented quite like this before. If father figure and drug dealer Scatter invested in Priest, likewise actual father Parks Sr. and underground businesspeople invested in *Super Fly*. This constituted a literal show of nepotism and alternative finance arrangements that stood as a tactical response to Hollywood’s entrenched white opportunity structures. Black hustlers like KC playing themselves on-screen revealed the immense potential for pleasurable and lucrative conversion of black subcultural behaviors into film product. The film’s narrative revolves around significant black economic activity operating inside intractable white-dominated power and profit structures, which is also the story of the film’s making. Priest’s and Eddie’s aggressive business dealings resonated with the black capitalism of the likes of Jesse Jackson and Jim Brown, as they vied with a retrenching film industry. In sum, *Super Fly* becomes a multilayered materialization of the black business pride and wealth aspiration that had been so deeply desired and long denied in the film arena and beyond.

The reflexive linkages between making *Super Fly* and “making it” in *Super Fly* are most powerfully captured in Eddie’s apology for the “rotten game . . . the man left us to play,” drug dealing and, by extension, blaxploitation filmmaking. Eddie’s statement—seductively positioning such costly activities as the only options available—neatly captures *Super Fly*’s powerful role as both precedent and precursor. The film set significant racial precedents in its thematic content and industrial relations, bringing into the cinematic spotlight the subcultural generation of wealth that had evolved over a long history of economic marginalization. Equally, as post-civil rights precursor, its romanticized ghetto entrepreneurs captured the emergence of the flexible and aggressively pro-business advancement strategies that would become central to black commercial culture, not to mention neoliberal society, thereafter. When culture critic

102 Innis statement in *New York Times*, “Black Movie Boom.”

Darius James contends that *Super Fly* and *The Mack* are the “two defining films of the 1970s blaxploitation cycle”—“the two films mentioned most frequently” by black people—he highlights the continuing resonance of those films that chronicled and mythologized black subcultural business practices and status structures.¹⁰³ As jobs disappeared, black cultural industry became even more important as an expanding route to advancement for young post-civil rights blacks. These films stand as blueprints for gangsta rap, hip-hop moguls, 1990s ghetto action films, and recently *American Gangster* (Ridley Scott, 2007), which was based on a magazine story called “The Return of Superfly.”¹⁰⁴ It is hard to come to terms with a film that so powerfully catalyzed post-civil rights attitudes of slick individualism. But the film demands recognition, for it is full of black agency and enterprise, as well as exploitative dynamics. *

103 Darius James, *That's Blaxploitation: Roots of the Baadasssss 'Tude* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995), 81. On black enterprise in *The Mack*, see Eithne Quinn, “‘Pimpin’ Ain’t Easy’: Work, Leisure and ‘Lifestylization’ of the Pimp Figure in Early 1970s Black America,” in *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*, ed. Brian Ward (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 211–232.

104 Mark Jacobson, “The Return of Superfly,” *New York Magazine*, August 7, 2000.

I would like to thank the Leverhulme Trust, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Peter Krämer, Brian Ward, Steve Neale, Mark Jancovich, and Cinema Journal's anonymous readers.