



Due to the black power movement, the height of blaxploitation, and the emergence of disco music, the 1970s represented a revolutionary and pivotal time for black people in American popular culture. In previous decades, black characters on screen were cast in excruciatingly few roles that did not make their blackness the butt of a joke or the motivation for their villainy. Despite the undeniable talent of black musical performers like Little Richard or Jimmie Hendrix, prior to the 1970s, black musical acts were played exclusively on radio stations for black people, preventing them from ever truly achieving the mainstream success enjoyed by acts like Elvis Presley or The Beatles. The 1970s represented a turning point for the black community's presence in popular culture. As talented black artists like Marvin Gaye continued to produce amazing art and black filmmakers and actors found their employment opportunities increasing, the mainstream began accepting that black artists were often much more exciting and cool than their white-bread counterparts. As revolutionary as the blaxploitation era of cinema was for black male creatives, the genre fell into many of the pitfalls of cinema at the time in its portrayal of black women, depicting them as sexually driven helpless figures who need saving

from themselves. 1974's *Abby* is a perfect example of a blaxploitation film that, despite its efforts to send a message of black empowerment, fails at its objective because of its inability to make Abby a well-rounded, three-dimensional character and reaffirms perceptions that black women's sexuality is inherently evil.

While it is important to note the ways in which blaxploitation films fail to sympathetically portray black women the way they did with black men, this failing was hardly unique to the blaxploitation genre and more symptomatic of a larger societal problem, where people fail to consider others' experiences through an intersectional lens (editor SVLLYwood, 2017, 3:05). For example, when a black woman in the 70s was groped by her white boss, she did not know if he felt like he could do that because she was black and he is white, she is a woman and he is a man, or if it is because he is in a position of authority over her. In reality, the reasoning does not matter. Each of these factors contributed to a situation where a white man felt he had power over a black woman, and they should be used to view the situation as a whole (editor SVLLYwood, 2017, 3:05). This phenomenon is referred to as 'Triple Oppression' and was first identified by Claudia Jones after she and other black women felt excluded from the decade's burgeoning feminist movement (editor SVLLYwood, 2017, 0:22).

Despite the genre's failings, blaxploitation's chief accomplishment, other than its increasing visibility for black actors on screen, lies in its embracing of the horror genre, specifically its ability to humanize the racialized monster and a demonized identity of blackness (editor SVLLYwood, 2017, 2:25). Blaxploitation filmmakers masterfully depicted monsters whose evil did not come from their blackness, but rather the oppression they faced from white people (editor SVLLYwood, 2017, 1:21). This choice cleverly communicates to the audience the ways white racism causes problems and violence in the black community. However, the genre of

blaxploitation fails to execute this formula for black women, opting instead to demonize black women on screen as vessels that could be easily manipulated into committing evil and sinful acts.

In 1970s cinema, "black womanhood, sexuality, working class status and diasporic culture are depicted as abnormalities rather than identities that should be treated with full humanity" (editor SVLLYwood, 2017, 0:47). 1974's *Abby*, directed by William Girdler, may be the prime example of this trope, telling the story of a black woman who is possessed by an evil god of chaos and sexuality from an African religion, commits acts of lust and violence, and can only be stopped when a group of Christian men works to exorcise the demon (Girdler, 1974). *Abby* perfectly exemplifies the term "black women as monstrosity," because it portrays natural feelings of desire black women will feel as evil temptations that should be punished and pushed away. By equating lust with things like violence or demons, the film *Abby* tells black women that their naturally occurring feelings are things they should be ashamed of (Girdler, 1974).

Of the seven tropes female characters in horror movies fall into, *Abby* represents the possessed monster. The possessed monster signifies how weak and easily persuadable men viewed women at this time and how close every woman naturally is to sin (Girdler, 1974, 3:14). Honestly, this film teaches its audience more about not empowering women than vice versa. *Abby* is portrayed as helpless throughout the film. In the few moments *Abby* regains consciousness, she begs her husband to help free her in a girl-like voice, a strong contrast from the demon's low timbre. This contrast represents how the filmmakers believed the pure parts of *Abby's* soul were the ones that resembled a child. In contrast, the part of her that feels desire is a monster that must be banished (Girdler, 1974, 30:27). Additionally, when *Abby* attempts to seduce her friend's husband by demanding to see the size of his genitals, it shows how men truly

believe there is nothing more evil than a woman insulting their size (Girdler, 1974, 29:45). Still, much can be learned from this failed message of black empowerment. Primarily, when fighting for the rights of groups we belong to, we must fight for all that belong to that group, or our fight will not be victorious.

References

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