

Superfly and the American Dream

The 1960s were both a tumultuous and empowering time for African Americans. In this era of rapid change, popular Hollywood studios abandoned their traditional representations of African Americans as servile and childlike beings for more realistic depictions. However, as African Americans increasingly moved into urban centers and political movements became more militant in the post-Civil Rights period, movies also began to reflect these changes¹. This shift in perspective gave rise to a set of aggressive and graphic “black-themed” pictures produced in the early 1970s, collectively known as the blaxploitation genre (Howard 9). A portmanteau of “black” and “exploitation,” the phrase “blaxploitation” was coined by Junius Griffin, head of the Los Angeles Chapter of the NAACP at the time who, along with many other activists, saw the films as defamatory to blacks (Howard 12). Although many of these films were derogatory in nature due to their depictions of blacks as dope dealers, pimps, and prostitutes, there were others that *did* attempt to reveal deeper truths about the minority experience in America: *Superfly* is one such “landmark film” (Howard 12).

Superfly, a 1972 blaxploitation film directed by Gordon Parks Jr. and starring Ron O’Neal in the leading role as Youngblood Priest, depicts a successful cocaine dealer with fifty dealers working under him who realizes one day that he does not want to deal drugs anymore. With a socially relevant soundtrack written and produced by soul singer Curtis Mayfield serving as a Greek chorus of sorts, the film stylishly portrays the life of black criminals living in a ghetto, addictively snorting cocaine, and having sexual encounters with beautiful women. Priest himself is a fashion icon, sporting long fur coats, trendy fedoras, and a “supercool” attitude. Although

¹ In *Superfly (1972) Documentary: One Last Deal*, Armond White, a film critic with the NY Press mentions that the films were a reflection of the “militancy of the time period.”

Priest has all the material goods he could ask for, he still does not feel emotionally fulfilled and makes the decision early on in the film to escape the business of dealing. One night, as Priest and his sidekick Eddie are heading out to pick up 30 kilos of cocaine from his friend and cocaine producer Scatter, white narcotics detectives appear to bust them before they can complete the job. An ironic twist occurs when the head detective, Deputy Reardon, gives them permission to operate, but only after he blackmails them into giving him \$10,000 of their profits per month. This complicates matters for Priest, who is looking to make a million dollars in four months so he can finally leave the business comfortably well off. As Deputy Reardon becomes more and more threatening, Priest decides to take matters into his own hands. Through an elaborately planned heist involving his “main squeeze” Georgia, he is able to outsmart the deputy and escape the business alive and with a load of cash to boot, essentially “stickin’ it to the Man.”

At first glance, the film may appear to be a sensual or sociopolitical fantasy, created primarily to appeal to the desires of ordinary people looking to escape the mundane for an hour or two, but the film is more than just entertainment. Priest is the product of his environment: hustling is not so much of a choice for him as a necessity. Although emotionally hardened after years of living a criminal lifestyle, Priest’s idealistic desire to eventually escape the business and make a better life for himself reveals the moral complexity of his character. In fact, *Superfly* places the morally ambiguous character of Priest at the film’s “heroic center” in order to illuminate the difficulties minorities are faced with in pursuing the American Dream due to the inequity of their general social positioning.

Through a dialogue between Priest and Eddie, the film exposes the exclusionary aspects of mainstream, legal modes of business. When Priest tells Eddie that he wants to leave the cocaine-dealing business, Eddie tells him solemnly, “Look, I know it’s a rotten game, but it’s the

only one The Man left us to play” (*Superfly*). Although “the Man” is not explicitly identified, it is clear through the context of the scene that Eddie is collectively referring to white oppressors of blacks when he uses the term. Here Eddie is specifically referring to the whites’ exclusion of blacks from the realm of legal entrepreneurship. Priest is the only one of the two who actually vocalizes a desire to escape the cocaine business, but Eddie also acknowledges the “rottenness” of the drug trade, indicating that it is not just Priest who is troubled by the criminal lifestyle. As an illegal means of income, the drug trade is both dangerous and morally bankrupt. William Lyne, Professor of English at Western Washington University, argues that “the film allows Priest and Eddie only two choices, between drug dealing or poverty and victimization, between working the system or getting crushed by it” (43). Priest uses drug dealing as a means to escape poverty as is exhibited when Priest, in response to his girlfriend Georgia urging him to leave the business as soon as he can, comments, “If I quit now ... I go back to being nothing, working some jive job for chump change.” For Priest, the cocaine business is the means by which he is able to provide a comfortable life for himself. The film implies that due to his race and by extension, his criminal record, Priest is not able to secure a mainstream job that would support his material desires. His use of the slang term “chump change” highlights his distaste of having to live a lawful, but ultimately impoverished, life.

The film extends its critique of societal constraints placed on blacks by emphasizing Priest’s rationality and intelligence. Parish and Hill observe that Priest has a “sensitive, articulate inner self,” which he hides behind his “insolent smile” (290). Although Priest is a tough-looking cocaine dealer, his hidden, articulate qualities are unveiled when, as Priest is laying out the details of his last “big score,” Eddie asks him, “how long has [getting out of the cocaine business] been in your head? And man, you don’t do nothing overnight” (*Superfly*). As his

cocaine-dealing partner of several years, Eddie recognizes that Priest is not one to make his decisions on a whim, as Priest is a rational, calculating man who thoroughly plans out his heists before he pulls them. By showcasing Priest's intelligence in this scene, it is clear that the film is unfixing the common stereotype of blacks being inferior in intelligence, which is an image popularized by earlier Hollywood films (Terry 12). By unfixing this stereotype, the film humanizes Priest and creates a disparity between his inborn abilities and the societal constraints placed upon him. In other words, depicting him as a strong, intelligent Black man renders him a potentially heroic figure unjustly victimized by a system which, the film posits, refuses to give him the equal opportunities he deserves.

The film underscores the fact that despite Priest's high intelligence, his socioeconomic status growing up failed to provide him with the guidance he needed to achieve success as defined by mainstream society. Lindsay Patterson, a film critic, suggests that the film critiques the inability of American society "to freely provide legitimate opportunities for its bright but impoverished young black men" (43). Priest is clearly both highly intelligent and enterprising, as he has prospered in the cocaine trade and has fifty men working under him; nevertheless, he is not able to achieve success through legitimate means. Raised in a ghetto, Priest lacks the guidance and education that would have allowed him to achieve financial success in a legal occupation; nevertheless, his run-ins with criminals as a child *did* expose him to alternative opportunities for financial success. At one point in the film, Priest reminds his friend and former mentor, Scatter, that "I've run errands for you ever since I was a kid. You were always the man. My man" (*Superfly*). The sincerity in Priest's voice leads the audience to assume that Scatter was a type of father figure to Priest when he was a child. The irony, of course, is that far from being the exemplary father figure who helps guide his "son" to become a law-abiding citizen and

morally upright man, Scatter played a central role in Priest's initiation into the drug-dealing world and at one point even boasts that he singlehandedly "got [Priest] started" in the cocaine business (*Superfly*). Through the depiction of this close, "familial" relationship with the older drug dealer who was able to make a small fortune in the cocaine business, the film emphasizes that Priest did not have access to the proper guidance that could have enabled him to prepare for a respectable, legal profession. As his primary role models were criminals, it becomes logical for the viewer to assume that as he grew older, Priest would himself begin to participate in criminal activities.

Though Priest sees his involvement in the drug trade as a necessary alternative to impoverishment, his dream to "get out of the life," based on his desire "not just to be forced into a thing because that's the way it is," indicates that he does indeed adhere to a personalized moral code (*Superfly*). To be sure, a cocaine-dealer, womanizer and all-around criminal, is hardly a moral exemplar by conventional standards. However, throughout the film Priest appears disillusioned and eager to leave the cocaine business. Priest's goal within the individualistic moral code he creates for himself is to maintain his freedom and independence. Rather than be "forced into" something, Priest wants to be able to live a self-determined life. His main point of contention with the criminal lifestyle is, in fact, that he has been forced into it by external societal pressures. Though Eithne Quinn argues that Priest's position as a drug dealer, given his socioeconomic situation, is "morally conscionable and even admirable" (94), I would argue that Priest's aversion to the drug trade and the disillusionment he experiences within it indicate that what is morally conscionable for him is more complex than what Quinn posits. Priest initially views the drug trade as a financially lucrative opportunity for him and therefore sees it as an acceptable occupation for him, but once he realizes that it encroaches on his freedom and right to

independent action, he seeks a way out. Priest's moral code motivates him to maintain his freedom and right to independent action. Since the drug trade does not allow him these two things, as it was something he was "forced into," Priest finds the drug trade morally unacceptable by his own standards.

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that his motivations for seeking a way out are hardly noble and disinterested. Although the drug trade is morally problematic for Priest, his use of it to garner enough money to leave the business forever indicates that along with freedom, he values materialistic happiness. As Brandon Wander argues, "[Priest] isn't 'free.' He wants to buy time to be free" (4). He may place a high value on his freedom, specifically the freedom to leave the cocaine business, but he also wants to be able to acquire the material goods and lifestyle that the drug trade provides him with—that is, he wants to leave the business but also wants to attain his own version of the American Dream, which he does not believe he will be able to achieve by any other means. His solution to these conflicting desires is to plan "one last big score," which he hopes will allow him to leave the cocaine business with a bundle of cash he can use to live comfortably on after leaving his "profession." Priest's plan involves selling 30 kilograms of cocaine for a total of one million dollars so that he can enjoy his freedom without ever having to work again. This indicates that his moral code and personal happiness are dependent on material prosperity. In other words, Priest's moral code does not entail living a "moral life" in the conventional sense, for he makes his choices not on the basis of altruism but rather on what is best for his own "wellbeing."

While Priest's morality is certainly questionable, as it allows for his participation in the drug trade and other traditionally immoral activities, it does, interestingly, have clear parameters. After Eddie questions his desire to leave the cocaine business, Priest explains to him, "Look, this

is a chance and I want to take it, before I have to kill somebody... Before somebody ices me” (*Superfly*). In other words, though he deals cocaine, Priest *is* concerned about eventually having to commit murder. This remark implies that, just as he was compelled to join the drug business to avoid poverty, Priest will one day be compelled to kill another human being due to circumstances beyond his control. His moral code therefore incorporates aspects of traditional morality, as he does not wish to take another human being’s life, but even this motivation is largely self serving rather than altruistic as it is directly linked to Priest’s desire to maintain his freedom. Wander says of black films that “each film is a ritual, a morality play, recognized and appreciated by its audience,”² though he does not explicitly define the type of moral lessons that these so-called “morality plays” convey. I would argue that at least in the case of *Superfly*, the morality that the film preaches is one based on self-determination. Priest wants the freedom to not *have* to commit murder, but his main motivation is to live a materially comfortable life—even if this life of leisure is acquired through the dealing of cocaine.

Due to his socioeconomic circumstances, Priest’s character is more meaningfully viewed and judged through the moral code he creates for himself. Alberto Destro explores the idea of “immoral morality” in *Faust*, and I see it evident in *Superfly* as well. Destro says of Faust that “his actions are measured, not according to moral criteria (in other words, of responsibility toward others), but only according to the criterion of how far he corresponds to the law of his actual character” (Destro 72). While Faust seeks a higher truth through experience for non-material purposes, however, Priest’s goal is ultimately grounded in the material world. Despite this difference between the characters, Priest proves similar to Faust in several respects, as he rejects traditional morality by adopting an alternative moral code for himself and pursues an

² A morality play is a play in which characters personify moral qualities (Britannica.com).

individualistic goal. Faust is usually considered immoral in the conventional sense due to his ill treatment of others and the selfishness with which he pursues his goal of self-realization. Priest can similarly be branded immoral due to his lack of concern for others (he supplies a dangerous drug to a large sum of people), and his disdain for the welfare of the community. He best expresses his lack of concern for others when three “black militants” approach him asking for “dues” to aid the black community, and Priest mocks them by saying he would only support them if they start “killing whitey” (*Superfly*). Considering the fact that these black men are subject to the rules and regulations of a white-dominated society, Priest is basically mocking them by asking that they do something as radical as killing all whites in order to win his allegiance. This remark also emphasizes that while Priest is concerned with his own goal of self-determination, he does not concern himself with the black community at large. Through his actions and attitude, it is clear that he abides by his own “immoral morality”: one that is not based on the needs of the many but on his own “needs.”

Nevertheless, the film underscores the complex nature of Priest’s mindset and situation by contrasting him with Eddie, who lacks a moral code and sense of judgment altogether. After Priest realizes that Reardon has killed Scatter, his cocaine producer and former mentor, he realizes that the deputy will use him and eventually dispose of him as well. He warns Eddie, “that man owns us,” but Eddie is unfazed and replies, “I’m glad he’s using me. Because I’m gonna make a piss pot full of money and I’m gonna live like a prince. A black f-cking prince!” (*Superfly*). While Priest’s individualistic moral code does not allow him to work under someone who will at the very least restrict his freedom, Eddie is perfectly content with just acquiring material goods and money, even if his right to independent action is taken away from him. Quinn categorizes Eddie’s thought process as “a self-conscious internalization of racial inequality” (97).

In other words, while Priest views the drug trade as a means by which he can achieve material prosperity, Eddie sees the drug trade as an end in and of itself due to his negative self-perception. Eddie even states that he can be “nothing nowhere else,” indicating his inability to see any possibilities for self-fulfillment beyond the drug trade. Unlike Priest, Eddie does not seek a “better” life for himself. He limits his life goals to achieving as much financial gain as possible in the present and does not concern himself with ideals of self-determination as Priest does—or even with self protection, and it is clear that this lack of an individualistic code will eventually lead to his destruction. On the other hand, Priest’s individualistic moral code, a manifestation of his rejection of racial inequality as limiting his options, allows him to remove himself from a dangerous situation and maintain his independence and identity. His sense of individualism is dependent on a notion of self that transcends racial limitations. Instead of subjecting himself to the societal constraints that bind him to the drug trade, Priest empowers himself by using the trade “he has been forced into” in order to subvert the system that constrains his freedom and use it instead to secure his economic *and* personal independence.

Under its flashy costumes and psychedelic soul music, *Superfly* is ultimately more than a story of black survival. Focusing specifically on the conflicted nature of the African-American masculine identity in an oppressive white society, the film sheds light on the exclusionary aspects of the American Dream through its portrayal of Youngblood Priest’s complex nature, socio-economic position and individualistic journey. In order to cope with the societal restrictions placed upon him, Priest rejects traditional morality and instead adopts an individualistic code to live by. This moral code allows him to use conventionally immoral methods to achieve his happiness, but it is also a source of empowerment for Priest, as he uses it to assert his independence and gain prosperity while seemingly entrapped within an exploitive

society. At its core, the film remains a socially relevant, powerful tale of one man's successful striving to transcend racial barriers and achieve individual fulfillment.

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