

Internet.Film.Fernsehen

Nina Zimnik

**„Is White Guilt Supposed to Make Me Forget  
I'm Running a Business?“**

From *Foxy Brown* (Jack Hill 1974)  
to *Jackie Brown* (Quentin Tarantino 1998)

**Abstract**

Afro-amerikanische Frauen und ihre Allianzen stellen ein neues Reservoir für die Fantasien Hollywoods. Auffällig sind bei den filmischen Bearbeitungen, dem Marketing und der resultierenden Fankultur, z.B. in „chat rooms“, die „Umdichtungen“ der Klassenverhältnisse und „Rassenstrukturen“, d.h. Modifikationen von historischen, persönlichen und medien-geschichtlichen Diskurszusammenhängen. Anzunehmen ist, dass diese Repräsentationen von Frauen einem mainstream-Publikum, d.h. auch weisen jungen Männern, schmackhaft gemacht werden müssen, wie der Fall Quentin Tarantino, einem der erfolgreichsten Regisseure Hollywoods, zeigt. Tarantinos Erfolg basiert auf seiner Vermarktung als Aussenseiter und der von Aussenseitern.

*Jackie Brown* stellt die Frage der Konstruktion von „Rassen“- und Klassenidentität auf verschiedenen filmischen Ebenen und auf der Ebene der Präsentation und Selbstpräsentation der Leben der Schauspieler und des Regisseurs. Diese Konstruktion werden auf ihre kulturimperialistischen Tendenzen hin untersucht.

(auf Grundlage eines Vortrages mit Video-Clips, gehalten im Department of English, State University of New York at Cortland)

"Is white guilt supposed to make me forget I'm running a business?" is the question Max Cherry, a white bailbonds man, asks his black client Ordell at the beginning of Quentin Tarantino's 1998 film *Jackie Brown*. Ordell, a black drug and firearms dealer, is in Max's office because he wants Max to bail out his "friend" Jackie Brown. Jackie Brown is a stewardess played by Pam Grier who had just gotten arrested and is accused of "intent", intent of selling cocaine. But Max refuses to shift the money that Ordell had paid him previously for another bond to Jackie's bond and insists the \$1,000 premium for his services must be paid first. In an already highly racialized atmosphere between the two men, a dialogue about false police accusations ensues. Max' question "Is white guilt supposed to make me forget I'm running a business?" prompts Ordell to stop playing and put the money on the table.

This question, however, also looms over Tarantino's own cinematic endeavors. Tarantino precipitated Pam Grier's come-back and not only that. According to the contract that Tarantino had with his production company Miramax, a certain percentage of the film's revenue would flow into Tarantino's distribution company Rolling Thunder that distributes blaxploitation films, the tradition Tarantino quotes in *Jackie Brown* and many other films. Max' question thus takes on new meaning. *Jackie Brown* is a film that would not exist without the tradition of the blaxploitation films of the seventies that it celebrates. It is thus a film that, as Max's remark indicates, comments on itself and, in the process of commenting, shows that it has no clearly demarcated self. However, these slippages do not make the film's semiotic stakes, race, money, and the self-conscious employment of a sex symbol, necessarily undecidable. Today, I will explore a few intertexts of the film and investigate three aspects: the way *Jackie Brown* constructs race relations under the imperatives of capitalism, the way it constructs discourses of alliances across race divisions, and the way these constructions, cross-racial alliances and a subjectivity defined by capitalism, are linked to each other.

Ordell is an arms dealer who, in the sequence that I just quoted, had just asked Max to set aside financial interests, disregard putative criminal evidence for a moment and feel "compassion" for Jackie Brown. Jackie was set up by two white agents of the Bureau of Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) hoping she'd eventually help them to put Ordell into jail. But Ordell doesn't know that at this point, and here we are right in the middle of the movie. Given the complicated and constantly changing motivations of the characters who - whether they know it or not - are all after half a million dollars, the actual story line in its intricacies is hardly transparent after watching the film once: Who is scheming what at what point? Or as Miramax, the film production company, put it in their internet summary: "there's only one question . . . who's doing who?" ([www.miramax.com/jackiebrown.framelow.html](http://www.miramax.com/jackiebrown.framelow.html))

Quentin Tarantino did, however, convey that Jackie is caught between the ATF and Ordell, and - let's hear Miramax again - "[b]y appearing to cooperate with both sides, Jackie attempts to outfox them both and walk away with a half million dollar payday" (<http://www.miramax.com:8888/ows-doc/jackiebrown/grier.html>, highlight by N.Z.). In the process - and this is my point of departure - Max proves himself to be Jackie's one and only friend. A white man altruistically helps a black woman or as Tarantino explains in an interview: "It's a love story [. . .] [a] love story with older people and older sensibility" (entertainment weekly on-line [www.ew.com/ew/features/971219/jackiebrown/index.html](http://www.ew.com/ew/features/971219/jackiebrown/index.html))

Tarantino's interest in cross racial romance has been noted before, for instance by Spike Lee who commented on the use of the word "nigger" (38 times) in *Jackie Brown*: "what does [Quentin] want to be made? an honorary black man?" ([www.godamongdirectors.com/tarantino/index.shtml](http://www.godamongdirectors.com/tarantino/index.shtml)). However, Tarantino is not first and foremost interested in "niggers". As he said many times in interviews, *Jackie Brown* is his homage to his leading woman, Pam Grier, whose come back he launched. Pam Grier was the so-called "Queen of Blaxploitation". Blaxploitation (a semantic mix of the words "black" and "exploitation") was a "popular" film genre in the 70s - we are talking about b-movies - and up to Tarantino's revival, it was a forgotten scandal. Given some exceptions and Oskar Micheaux as the historical precursor, they were the first films that African Americans made for and about African Americans. Cheaply produced, they grossed enormous profits, and were, after first being associated with a porn distributor chain, even produced by Warner Brothers, one of the big Hollywood players.<sup>1</sup> Blaxploitation presents, after Spike Lee's so-called black realism, the most successful black film genre to date. Cinema scholar Mark Reid describes blaxploitation as "narratives, romances that exploit violence and explore black sensuality while depicting racist acts by white villains" (14). Let me add to that: Blaxploitation depicts street life. It is fast-paced action film. It always places a large emphasis on the sound track, usually 70s soul music. And it thrives on the aestheticization of race conflicts. Decades of racist representation in Hollywood had reduced African American women to parts like the funny housekeeper, and men to gas station attendants or "bucks". Blaxploitation, on the other hand, showed black people who were in charge - intelligent, witty, cool, fashionable, ruthless, sexy characters set in outrageous plots. Pam Grier, who was going out with blaxploitation producer and comedian Richard Pryor at the time, was, next to model Tamara Dobson, the star of blaxploitation.

1 *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Melvin van Peebles 1971) was distributed by Cinemation Industries, a company that "distributed and produced such popular low-budget porn films as *Inga* (1968) and *Fanny Hill* (1969)" and placed a "major emphasis" on the erotic portrayal of women" (Reid 82).

Tarantino's film cites this tradition. E.g. when Jackie buys a seventies inspired black suit at the Del Amo Mall, it makes her "look like the badass in the room" as the white sales girl puts it, a comment on one of the great blaxploitation successes, *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song* (1971) by Melvin van Peebles. Further, as the typescript on the poster advertising the film indicates, *Jackie Brown* is written in the tradition of a particular cinematic precursor, namely *Foxy Brown*, one of the genre's most popular productions directed by Jack Hill in 1974 with Pam Grier playing Foxy.



Sid Haig, e.g., who plays the judge in *Jackie Brown* was Foxy's brother, and he starred with Pam Grier in four other blaxploitation films.

As the change in the status and function of Sid Haig already indicates, Tarantino constructs charged links between *Jackie Brown* and *Foxy Brown*. Before I explore them further, let me first give you a quick summary of *Foxy Brown*. *Foxy Brown* is the story of Foxy, her "revenge" and efforts to bring about "justice". Foxy's boyfriend, a black undercover policeman who fought drug trafficking, was killed by white drug lords. Foxy's own brother, a small drug pusher, had revealed his identity to the drug lords, to Miss Catherine and her lakey boyfriend Steve. Foxy takes up the fight against the drug bosses and the white establishment with which they are intertwined. In order to do so, she poses as a prostitute in the upper-class call girl ring that Miss Catherine and Steve run in addition to their drug business. In the course of the film, Foxy ruins the reputation of the corrupt white judge who facilitates Miss Catherine's business on the level of jurisdiction, and kills a few white men who raped, tortured and drugged her, criminals who wage evil on the black community. Finally she kicks her brother out of town and takes revenge on Miss Catherine and Steve. The film is interspersed with wild action sequences involving car chases and fights in a white lesbian bar, and it contains sensationalist, lurid depictions of violence against women, e.g. the display of Pam Grier's half-naked body as Foxy is being raped and tortured.

Now, *Jackie Brown* opens with a long shot of Pam Grier and a song. The duration of the tracking shot photographing Pam Grier's profile as the passenger belt moves forward, indicates that aesthetics have changed from the days of blaxploitation: the film is "decaffeinated, at least compared to the so-hip-it-hurt mayhem Tarantino unleashed in 1992's *Reservoir Dogs* and 1994's *Pulp Fiction*,"

as *Entertainment Weekly* put it in yet another postmodern citation<sup>2</sup>. ([www.ew.com/ew/features/971219/jackiebrown/index.html](http://www.ew.com/ew/features/971219/jackiebrown/index.html)). The song is "Across 110<sup>th</sup> Street" performed by the Bobby Womack, and it was the title song of a film by Bobby Shear. The lyrics are sung from the perspective of a man, a "brother of three", who got "out of the ghetto". He employed questionable ethics in order to advance himself in life. In the film by the same name, "110<sup>th</sup> Street", is a street in Manhattan, and I am not sure what it signified in the early 70s. Perhaps it was indeed a place where "a woman's trying to catch a trick on the street" as Bobby Womack put it. Today, however, the West part of 110<sup>th</sup> Street is a dividing line between black Harlem and the gentrified outskirts of the Upper West side in the South. The Upper West side is a wealthy white part of town known for its old Jewish and new yuppie cultures. Heavily guarded by security forces on the streets, the buildings of Columbia University start at W. 112<sup>th</sup> Street and extend up to about 123<sup>rd</sup> Street. Now, the line "a woman's trying to catch a trick on the street" refers to a woman who does not gain her money honestly and respectfully, namely a prostitute. My point about the use of the song is that both the man whose subjectivity the song sets forth and the woman whom he mentions are not just "going across 110<sup>th</sup> Street" but by doing so, are situating themselves on the border between the races. Imagining the perspective from which Tarantino wrote the script for *Jackie Brown*, I would say the song's characters are moving along and moving about their business in a hybrid space, a space-in-between that both separates and unites two distinct cultural spheres, providing both a zone of interchange and division. Spike Lee insinuates ("does [Tarantino] want to be made an honorary black man?") that this would also be a description of the imaginary space which Tarantino, by immersing himself in African American culture, seems to want to inhabit.

*Jackie Brown* is based on the novel *Rum Punch* by Elmore Leonard where Jackie was called Jackie Bryars and was white. Writing the script to *Jackie Brown*, Tarantino transformed the questions of race that the novel had set forth ostentatiously through a plot that had Ordell sell arms to neo-Nazis. Different from Michael Jackson or Madonna who wanted us to believe "it don't matter if you're black or white", some of *Jackie Brown*'s most memorable dialogues are the ones where Tarantino toys with the history of racism and his characters' inscription in it. Remember, for instance, when Ordell pulls Max Cherry's leg about Winston. Max keeps a picture of himself and Winston up on the wall, which shows them with arms around each other, a picture that is prominently displayed for his clients' gaze. As Ordell noticed, the photo both masks and runs counter the reality of their work relationship and characterizes it at the same time. Winston is Max' employee, Max makes a profit off him. Winston, a strong, tall, black man who

<sup>2</sup> Pam Grier starred in *Coffy* (Hill 1973).

solves situations that Max cannot even enter – Winston finds men who don't want to be found in the black community — solving them, as Max jokes when he asks Winston to get Ordell for him, not by virtue of his “charming personality”. While getting the short end of the stick in the capitalist structures of his employment situation, Winston is represented as also protecting the one who exploits him economically, moreover, enabling Max to do so in the first place. And perhaps such a display of racial harmony is also conducive to enhancing business.

This sequence, i.e. when Ordell meets Max, is the point of the film that most sharply edges out the history of race relations, casting them, as the whole film has a tendency to do, in light of economic relationships of subordination and domination and not in terms of desire, as Tarantino who defines Jackie Brown as a “love story”, suggests. “Is white guilt supposed to make me forget I'm running a business?”, are the words with which Max tries to shut up Ordell when Ordell asks for “compassion” for Jackie. Ordell's plea for “compassion” serves a rhetorical end, namely to answer to Max's insistence on getting paid first. This end, however, does not do away with the need for compassion for Jackie that Ordell voices. Max's response, however, frames Ordell in a history of race conflicts and affirmative dynamics, and, within the order of the dialogue, presents an asynchronic reply to Ordell's interpretation of the photo on the wall. Ordell, first quiet, then answers: “Oh, this is it, ha?”, and, in a gesture of upmanship, pulls out the fee Max demanded for his services in cash. Echoing the American past of race conflicts and a present that is built upon them, Ordell's tone and gesture are marked by a certain bitterness. Yet, he also “simply” acknowledges “business”, that is, the terms of his life, of Max' life and of their specific contract. The joke of reading the photo has gone sour: as a white man inscribed in US history, Max is, of course, burdened with this intangible entity of collective “white guilt” which his remark he both acknowledges and displaces. Even if Max simply wants to get down to business, pulling the race card, joking about white guilt in order to expedite a deal, is a gesture that performatively denies what it calls up. Max, being nobody's fool, refuses to actualize any of these burdensome implications to Ordell's advantage. Here, the film constructs a scene where historical guilt does not translate into individual expiation. In response, Ordell plays his own trump card: he doesn't need a brake; as a drug and arms dealer, he is economically more potent than Max; his money is Max's bread and butter. Capitalism, “running a business”, the need for the men to enter into an exchange, frames them in a space where guilt is displaced by business interests.

In short, *Jackie Brown* explores the construction of race relations under the imperatives of capitalism. The film raises this question on various levels:

1. on the level of the plot and its dialogues as I just cited them

2. on the level of the presentation and self-presentation of the personal lives of the actors and of the director, and
3. on the level of the intersection of “real-life” discourses and their continuity in the film.

Both Tarantino and Grier are represented as people who made it in a hostile world, unreceptive to their talents. They are losers that turned into winners and, in that, mirror the characters they devise.

If you click on “Quentin's story” on the Miramax site for *Jackie Brown*, you'll read:

“Hollywood's history has its shares of artistic rebels, and writer/director Quentin Tarantino has already established himself as one of the most unique and talented filmmakers of his generation. Not bad for a former video store rental clerk whose biggest professional credit a couple of years ago was an appearance as an Elvis impersonator on ‘The Golden Girls’”

(<http://www.miramax.com:8888/ows-doc/jackiebrown/grier.html>).

Tarantino fan sites will tell you that Tarantino was caught stealing from K-Mart at age 13, stealing namely the copy of Elmore Leonard's novel *The Switch*, the book in which the characters Ordell and Louis appeared originally. And Tarantino has been in the news on and off over the course of the past years because he has engaged in several violent brawls. Thus, to the public, Tarantino is presented as an underdog, an alienated, formerly poor young white man, who smoked dope, had his share of humiliation and basically no bourgeois future staked out for him – but who won in the end by virtue of precisely the qualities that had dogged him in the past. Both he and Grier are presented as (former) marginal subjects, underdogs who made it as underdogs.

The film itself thrives on similarly paradoxical constructions of success. Just as Tarantino capitalizes on an aura of glamor that strictly speaking doesn't pass as one, Jackie, who walks away “with a half million payday”, generated money out of nothing, thus epitomizing the uncanny mechanisms of capitalism itself. Ordell's money “belongs to nobody”, as Jackie tells Max; the ATF thinks they are talking about \$50.000 and not about a half million; and Jackie takes off with a Mercedes that “won't be missed” either. Like Pam Grier and Quentin Tarantino, their character Jackie thus also made it in a world that wanted to condemn her to menial jobs.

Part of the charm of *Jackie Brown* thus lies with the continuity between film and real life that the film constructs. The characters suffer from demands that are similar to the ones that the actors and the director. Robert Forster had some brief success in forgotten series in the 70s and “was down to giving free motivational speeches while trying not give up on himself” as *New York Variety* wrote (<http://www.godamongdirectors.com/tarantino/faq/rediscovery.html>). Forster, whose false hair is “real”, we may assume, got cosmetic surgery in order to keep up with

Hollywood beauty standards, most likely with the intent to keep himself afloat in the film industry.

On Miramax' *Jackie Brown* homepage, one of the pages announces apodictically: "Pam Grier is Jackie" (<http://www.miramax.com:8888/ows-doc/jackiebrown/grier.html>). On another page, Pam Grier is quoted as saying:

"Jackie never gives up. She uses her wits to win, but on her own terms with her own method, style and intelligence. She's is not a good victim. That's what I like about her. I'm not a good victim. I've had the will to survive for twenty years in this business and I've got the scars to show it."

Some scars obviously don't "show". The media have indulged in admiring Pam Grier's physical appearance, a beauty at age 48, who as every fan knows, had cancer, and survived tropical disease, disagreeable employment situations and racial discrimination. As you may remember, the topic of cosmetic surgery comes up in her conversation with Max Cherry at her kitchen table when they talk about age and aging. Max admits he "got sensitive about his hair" and "did something about it". While he asserts: "I look into the mirror and it looks like me", Jackie responds: "Nay, it's not you, it's different."

My point is the following : Jackie might "be" Pam Grier or Pam Grier might "be" Foxy - yet, while Jackie "is" also Foxy - which is what the marketing and the cinematic references suggest -, "it's different." The discursive slippages and intertextual references that establish the continuity between the two characters Pam Grier plays (Jackie and Foxy) are selective at best. In *Foxy Brown*, Foxy enlists the help of the Black Panthers. In an office decorated with symbols of black power, e.g. Angela Davis's poster, Foxy convinces the "neighborhood committee" to fight for her cause. She declares she wants "justice" for her "brother", and for everyone else's family, end even more than that: "I want justice for all of them and for all the other people whose lives are being bought and sold so that a few big shots can climb up on their back and laugh at the law and laugh at human decency and most of all, I want justice for a good man who went out of his neighborhood to do what he thought was right." When the Black Panther spokesperson suggests her true motif is not "justice" but "revenge", Foxy responds: "You'll just take care of the justice and I'll handle the revenge myself".

Now, "revenge" means castration. Literally. Dressed as police officers, the Black Panthers "arrest" Steve, Miss Catherine's boyfriend who had a thing for Foxy. In a twist on justice and revenge, Foxy orders the Black Panther spokesman to cut off the penis of Steve that she then forwards to Miss Catherine who is, of course, mortally wounded by the loss. In other words, *Jackie Brown* gets its mileage out of references to a cinematic tradition that is hostile to "buying and selling lives", hostile to those who do, i.e. the film's impetus is anticapitalist and unrelenting. Acting on behalf of all people whose lives "were bought and sold", Foxy castrates



Pam Grier in der Rolle der Jackie Brown in einer Szene des Films *Jackie Brown*

the white man who wreaked havoc on the black community, and desired her but had her tortured, raped and enslaved. In the famous final sequence of *Foxy Brown*, Foxy enters Miss Catherine's house and is body-searched by her male entourage. After making sure Miss Catherine understands the fate of Steve, Foxy pulls her gun out from under her afro wig - her foes forgot to check it - and shoots Miss Catherine's male entourage. Hiding her weapon under black drag, Foxy performs a black woman for white people who (including Miss Catherine) desired her but made her suffer, killing the men with the help of their own fetish to which they were blind.

In comparison, 25 years later, Pam Grier plays a role in which she loves Max, a white man who is her only friend, with whom she wants a future, a man who rejects her advances. Yet, we should not forget, many white men loved the film, that is, Grier is playing to a white mainstream audience that is, to white men who are also charmed by a tradition that celebrates their castration - which brings us back to the question: "Who's doing who?"

The theme of a white man who is Jackie's only friend figures the continuity between real life and film that *Jackie Brown* stages self-consciously: in many interviews, Grier profusely thanked Tarantino for rescuing her career. But obviously, both Tarantino and Grier know what critic Barbara Johnson once asserted: "nothing fails like success". At the end of *Jackie Brown*, we see Jackie driving away in

Ordell's Mercedes, brooding to the sound of "Across 110<sup>th</sup> Street". Yet, if "Pam Grier is Jackie", what is the relationship between Grier and the woman who has to resort to "tricks" to survive?

If Tarantino's discursive construction (be it self-engendered or coming from critics) resembles Grier's and Foster's as well as Jackie's, Tarantino's marginality is displaced onto that of a black woman, the character she plays and a character who loves her. Although Jackie does not use guns prominently during the film, Pam Grier as Jackie is still portrayed as the phallic woman she once was in the blaxploitation genre in Tarantino's publicity stills. In other words, we are looking at discourses where an endangered white male subjectivity is rescued by drawing upon the reservoir of cool, phallic black womanhood. We are looking at discourses where a white man consolidates his own identity and further his economic success through a story of individuated, black feminine heroism. In the fantasy space of 110<sup>th</sup> Street, white men's desire is displaced onto the body of the phallic black female. To the extent that castration does not hold sway over Grier, her representation guarantees the promise that subjects are able to circumvent it, compensate for it etc., entertaining an age-old dream of superiority of white men.

[www.ew.com/ew/features/971219/jackiebrown/index.html](http://www.ew.com/ew/features/971219/jackiebrown/index.html)

[www.godamongdirectors.com/tarantino/index.shtml](http://www.godamongdirectors.com/tarantino/index.shtml)

[www.miramax.com](http://www.miramax.com)

Leonard, Elmore (1993). *Rum Punch*. London: Penguin.

Reid, Mark A. *Redefining Black Film*. Oxford and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993.

*Foxy Brown* (Jack Hill 1974)

*Jackie Brown* (Quentin Tarantino 1998)