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Brno studies in English. 2000, vol. 26, iss. 1, pp. [101]-110

ISBN 80-210-2523-9

ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104276>

Access Date: 18. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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THE RIGHT THING AND AFTER: THE CONSTRUCTION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY IN RECENT AMERICAN FILM

Introduction: The Movies

The year of 1989 saw a major cultural event: the opening of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*. This film, set in the black parts of Brooklyn, brought renewed attention to the situation of African Americans in the urban ghettos. The enormous acclaim of what has become by now a classic American film narrative, fueled by the controversy that was so skillfully masterminded by the great media manipulator Lee, was certainly not undeserved. Since much has been written and said about its cinematic merits, I believe there is no need for yet another dive into the textual ocean of reviews, analyses and controversies, to give one more summary of the frequent case for and the rather rare case against the feature and its politics. Instead, I would like to briefly comment on a number of films by (African-)American directors with very much the same subject matter that followed Spike's sweeping success.

In 1991, the twenty-three-year-old John Singleton, freshly graduated from the University of Southern California's film studies department, made his directorial debut with *Boyz N the Hood*, 1992 saw the appearance of another ghetto drama set in South Central Los Angeles—called appropriately *South Central* (directed by Steve Anderson)—and in 1993 the Hughes twins (who were twenty then) shot *Menace II Society*.

It seems to me that the rise of this new genre—of which the above three features are only better-known representatives—is not accidental. It was Spike Lee who opened the door into the ghetto, the others used the opportunity and poured in. Since then, scenes from “the hood” streets have become a commonplace occurrence on American screens.

The three movies simply beg to be grouped together and compared. Like *Do the Right Thing*, they address questions of racial and social tensions in the

poorest areas of the United States, this time set in the heart of Los Angeles. All the three features abound with depictions of poverty, broken families, alcoholism, drug addiction, police brutality, gang warfare and meaningless violence. Their protagonists are all young, black and angry. If there is one fundamental problem they are—consciously or unconsciously—attempting to solve, it is finding a way out of the vicious circle that offers them no other career options than those of a dealer, mugger, murderer or a potential murder victim. Despite all their macho gun wielding, they remain in many respects helplessly trapped, a position that results in violent fits of rage.

All the three features are cautionary tales and also try to suggest to their audience, particularly young black ghetto youths, some possible solutions. This, in my opinion, is one of the first points of difference between *Do the Right Thing* on the one hand, and its Los Angeles “sequels” on the other. When at the end of the hottest day in NYC, Sal destroys Radio Raheem’s boom box and amidst the general turmoil the white police officers strangle the unhappy Public Enemy fan and immediately leave the scene, thus abandoning Sal’s Famous Pizzeria to the raging crowd, it is Mookie who starts the attack by throwing a garbage can through the pizzeria’s window. Is he, a reluctant but nevertheless reliable employee of Sal’s, taking sides with his own race? Is he, by channeling the energies of the crowd to the building, in a way protecting Sal and his sons and thus preventing another meaningless murder? Which of the two ensuing quotes that appear before the credits are we to prefer: the stand of Malcolm X, which is tolerant of violence, or the anti-violence position of Martin Luther King? Lee has presented us with a very plausible mixture of characters, motives, and attitudes, a cocktail that given the right circumstances might turn lethal, as it in reality very often does. The positions of the characters, with the exception of the murdering police, are quite understandable, the conflict is, almost like in an ancient tragedy, inevitable, yet who is to blame? And the main question: What is the right thing to do? When the lights go up, along with one’s baseball cap one has to put on one’s thinking cap as well: this feature requires some mental effort. Or put from a different perspective: the deeper the analysis, the more complex the answer.¹

Unlike Spike Lee, John Singleton, Steve Anderson and the Hughes brothers do not leave the viewers in the dark about what is to be done. Both Singleton and Anderson introduce characters that function as mouthpieces of their own opinions, lecturing to the protagonists (and the audience) about the necessary course of action, while the Hughes brothers articulate the same by surrounding the main character with a couple of concerned friends who suggest, in a somewhat more subtle manner, a possible way out.

¹ In addition to the fact that *Do the Right Thing* presents a much less clear-cut solution to the social and racial ills of the ghetto, there are other differences that set the feature apart from its “hood” sequels: drugs and gang violence are conspicuously missing from the Spike Lee’s narrative.

John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood* is in fact an exemplary tale about three possible courses of development of young black urban males. Doughboy, in a shrewd casting move played by the popular rapper Ice Cube, offers the least acceptable alternative. Being the less gifted (and therefore less loved) half-brother in a single-parent family, he resorts to hanging around on street corners, seeks refuge in alcohol, and lives by drug dealing. His brother Ricky almost manages to gain a college football fellowship, but being hindered by his family condition (brought up by a single mother, already married with a young child) and insufficient survival skills finally falls victim to gang violence. It is only Tre, the most gifted boy in the hood, who manages to trick out; backed by his father, who gives him vital advice on a wide variety of topics ranging from the use of "rubber" to the question of culturally biased SAT tests or problems of gentrification. The importance of having a strong father figure is made apparent by the explicit comparison with the family across the street, whose offspring is much less fortunate: Brenda, the single mother of Ricky and Doughboy, is conditioned to lose, a failure for which her sons pay with their lives. What the film suggests then is that one cannot change the life in "the hood" with its enormous problems. However, with a strong, politically-aware, responsible father and some intelligence of one's own one can change one's life.

The Father's responsibility is also presented as the remedy at the heart of Steve Anderson's *South Central*. Here, the main protagonist, Bobby Johnson, struggles to win the affection of his son and to prevent him from repeating the same mistakes that had almost destroyed his own life. The film follows his development for about ten years and presents his remarkable transformation from a petty criminal, gang murderer and jailbird to his final rehabilitation and arrival at responsibility. Like in *Boyz N the Hood*, there is the inevitable black donor, a strong personality who, like a guardian angel, breaks the magic spell of ignorance and violence: the fellow convict Ali, a larger than life adherent of the Nation of Islam, opens up to Bobby new intellectual horizons and shows him the way. When Bobby gets out of jail on parole, he confronts Ray Ray, the head of the Deuce, a gang that Bobby helped build. In the meantime, however, the cynical gang leader is using his ten-year-old son Jimmy to steal car stereos for him, a dangerous thing in the American ghetto where almost everybody seems to be walking around (or even sleeping) with a gun. So, during one of his thefts Jimmy gets shot in the back by a car owner. In the final showdown over Jimmy's future, Ray Ray offers revenge (the possibility of killing the car owner who shot him) and the glamorous life of crime (symbolized by the possibility of driving a BMW). Bobby, on the other hand, offers him fatherly love, a clear conscience, hope and peace. Walking out into the sunset, Bobby triumphs and the viewers are led to assume that Jimmy will stay out of jail and in due time become a responsible father to his own children.

Now, what is the right thing to do for Caine, the principal character of *Menace II Society*? Caine has no father to lean on because his father, once a drug

dealer, got shot and his mother died from an overdose. Growing up with his grandparents, however, he makes his living in his father's track. He rejects the traditional moral lessons of his Christian grandparents, and similarly a straight career, a regular job where work is required, offers no temptations. Upon leaving school he leads a rather meaningless life in the 'hood,' hanging around with his pals like O'Dog and others, whose favorite past-time it is to play constantly the footage of O'Dog killing a Korean grocery store owner, taken by the store's security camera. In addition to Caine's bad company, there are a number of characters who, in a somewhat more subtle way, articulate possible options at Cain's disposal: a young "sort of a widow" Ronnie offers him a very attractive relationship and family life. Ronnie's plan is supported by her husband Perell, Caine's father figure, who is serving a life sentence for murder. Perell asks Caine to take his wife and look after his son and teach him "better than he [Perell] taught Caine." And finally there is a young convert to the Nation of Islam, Sharif, who, aided by Caine's former teacher, invites Caine to join him in his move to live in a Muslim community in Kansas City. Ultimately Caine's inner conflict boils down to the question whether he will accompany Ronnie and her son on her trip to Atlanta to take up a job there. As his name suggests, however, Caine is a doomed figure. Therefore in the very last moment of the film he gets gunned down by an enemy gang, people he antagonized by making one of their female friends pregnant and then severely beating up her cousin who came to settle the matter.

Despite the film's surface nihilism and cynicism (marked by a general feeling of hopelessness surrounding the main character, graphic depictions of violence, the colorful rendering of the ghetto teenage slang and the conspicuous absence of a single character who would, as in the above two features, function as the ultimate giver of good advice) one can still see a positive answer. Allen and Albert Hughes do say what the right thing to do is. It is for Caine to join Ronnie and her child and leave for Atlanta. The fact that we are, once again, confronted with a cautionary tale is further suggested by Caine's final voice-over. At one point in the film it is made apparent that Caine sees his life as an essentially meaningless affair. Having been warned by his grandfather he replies: "You're alive ... who says that's good?" At the very end of the movie, however, he does find out what the meaning is, saying that now he does care to be alive. But for him "it is too late." Not so for his audience. Between the shots, through action rather than through a single wise character, the Hughes brothers suggest the same answer: responsibility, fatherhood and moving out.

The Male Characters

	1991	1992	1993
	Boyz N the Hood	South Central	Menace II Society
Heroes	Tre	Bobby	Caine
Father figures	Furious Styles (father)	Ali (fellow convict)	Perell (convict)
Misfits, Gangsters	Dough Boy	Ray-Ray	O'Dog

If we look at the principal characters of all three features, the marked absence of women is conspicuous. Thus rather than speaking about the construction of African American identity in these films it would be better to speak about the construction of African American male identity. With the exception of Caine's friend Ronnie and Tre's mother, who delegates the job of Tre's upbringing to his father, women are either presented as mere dummies to fill the screen with or as examples of how debilitating life in the ghetto can be (Brenda, the mother of Ricky and Doughboy in *Boyz N the Hood*; Carol, Bobby Johnson's wife in *South Central*). Constantly referred to as "them bitches," they provide some sexual satisfaction to the maturing males (in so doing, complicating their lives) but do not seem to be imbued with any significant identity of their own—a marked limitation one might say. Surely we could ask: are African American women not involved in the process of their children's upbringing? Is the idea of a single mother, working against the odds, whose child makes it to college, after all a sheer impossibility? Is the ghetto a man's world only?

The more richly drawn male characters could be grouped into three major categories: the young inexperienced heroes, the father figures and the victimized "misfits." As for the heroes, they are initially defined by their adherence to a gang or a group of friends they hang out with. They are not the dominant figures in the groups, but they are the most thoughtful ones. Whereas at the beginning of the films they are presented as largely passive, in the course of the narratives they become capable of change: toward more activity, which manifests itself by their leaving their group. Thus Tre of *Boyz N the Hood* leaves the death squad on their way to take revenge on an enemy gang and Bobby Johnson of *South Central* leaves what has originally been the sole source of his identity: the gang Deuce. In marked contrast to these two protagonists, Caine of *Menace II Society* is incapable of a clear decision. Moving around in circles, he pays with his life.

In parallel, one can follow a similar contrast between Tre and Bobby on the one hand and Caine on the other: the development toward non-violence. Neither Tre nor Bobby is in the end willing to subscribe to the “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” position and so they save their skins and gain at least some chance of reaching old age. Whereas Tre’s version of non-violence is a more common-sense one (being reasonably smart, he sees that it represents no real solution and after all he has other plans than spending the rest of his life in jail), Bobby’s plea not to kill sounds almost like a sermon: under the guidance of the black Muslim Ali he becomes a religious man. Caine, on the contrary, gets eliminated precisely because of his violence. To sum up, those who are capable of development and are ready to sever the bonds with perpetual violence prevail. Those who do not are doomed to die.

As for the “donors,” or givers of advice, their didacticism has been mentioned. They are mythical, larger-than-life figures that enable the main characters (Tre, Bobby) to achieve spiritual growth and the filmmakers (Singleton, Anderson) to express, in very unambiguous terms, their views about how the miserable ghetto conditions could possibly be changed and if not that, at least how it is possible to survive. As in the category of heroes, the authors of *Menace II Society* have struck a somewhat different path in that they did not introduce such a dominant character. Rather than assigning this role to a single person, they have surrounded Caine with a whole group of people who suggest to him possible alternatives (the commune in Kansas City and, above all, family life in Atlanta). If there is one person to choose, however, it is Ronnie’s husband Perell. The Hughes brothers stress his importance and fatherly standing in relation to Caine at a crucial moment when Ronnie and Caine come to see him in jail and ask his permission to leave for Atlanta. Perell makes the point very clearly: speaking about his son, who might become Caine’s step-son, he says to Caine: “Teach him better than I taught you.” This brings him quite close to Ali from *South Central* who at one point in the film (also in jail, lecturing to Bobby) exclaims passionately: “For me it’s too late, but not for you. Me ... and you are brothers and we’ve got to be there for our children.”

The gang leaders, on the other hand, could be grouped differently. First there are Doughboy of *Boyz N the Hood* and O’Dog of *Menace II Society*; despite their awesome achievement in matters of death, they are essentially small fry, victimized kids of the streets. They act as they do because they have been abandoned, by their families, their communities, their country. In the crucial moments of their education there was nobody to give them love and show them the possibility of a different career where guns are not vital prerequisites for success and respect could be gained by something as seemingly irrelevant as knowledge. On the other side there is Ray Ray of *South Central*, the unscrupulous big shot: running a drug trafficking gang of 50,000, using boys as young as ten: a one-dimensional, cynical monster.

“Hollywoodness”

The cinematic construction of this thoroughly insensitive gangster opens the question of how the films’ “realism” bows to the requirements of a traditional American film narrative, such as the necessity of moral uplift and a happy ending of a suspiciously sentimental nature. In this sense, *South Central* is probably the least realistic and most “Hollywood-like,” not only on the thematic level (a predictable conflict between two clearly defined adversaries, one good, one bad; Bobby’s complete moral rehabilitation and the ultimate triumph of non-violence; his remarkable asexuality; the film’s reassuring message of hope for the future;) but also because of some of its technical aspects (such as the very obvious use of tear jerking music). The film ends with a lovely unquestioning ending: it is enough for us to know that Bobby’s love and responsibility have prevailed over hatred and revenge. Yet nobody asks what happens to Ray Ray and his Deuce, the addicted junkies in the streets and the impoverished population of South Central Los Angeles. It is interesting to note that even the density of “mother fuckers” and “sonofabitches” is markedly lower than in the other two features. Likewise, Ali’s Black Muslim teaching contains nothing controversial: Allah is conspicuously absent, as are any provocative references to the white race. These instructions rather resemble the raising of African American consciousness in civics lessons on the elementary school level.

Boyz N the Hood also suffers, in my opinion, from its severe didacticism and from the way the individual black persons are constructed as typical examples. This is perhaps the major difference between Singleton’s work and Spike Lee’s seminal achievement. Mookie and Sal are very plausible characters, Furious Styles and Tre much less so. But the film makes its point clearly and I regard it as a well-intentioned, earnest effort to hint at a solution to some fundamental social problems. (Yet, the question is whether it is possible for us to rely on commercial cinema to provide us with any solutions to any social problems whatsoever.) Although darker than the happy ending of *South Central*, it does end up on a slightly optimistic note. After all, it was Tre with whom we have been asked to identify. And Tre, after trials and tribulations, is bound for college.

On the contrary, Caine, the main character of *Menace II Society*, is hard to take sides with. He appears to be in search of something which he himself cannot quite identify since he has not been given the chance to develop along these lines. In spite of his “soft spots” (such as the feeling he manifests by trying to support Ronnie and her son), he remains a hard and violent youth—not quite an officer and a gentleman or at least a likeable gangster one could cheer for. Yet his impulsiveness and inner groping make him, perhaps, despite our uneasiness with him, a more plausible figure. And moreover: who says it is necessary to identify with a character? It is enough for a character to make us think. Such was, I believe, the original intention of the Hughes brothers and in spite of some

heavy-handedness in the depiction of the social evils of the ghetto they have succeeded. Their fast, angry narrative (excellent editing marked by long, uninterrupted shots with a very realistic look) represents a grim, yet vital correction to the dream-like spirit of *South Central* and the classroom air of *Boyz N the Hood*. It is quite alarming to realize that what they describe is probably not hyperbole.

What differentiates these recent ghetto narratives from Spike Lee's depiction of a hot summer day in Brooklyn (or perhaps from some earlier cinematic explorations of urban life by the independent director John Sayles: *Brother from Another Planet* – 1984, *City of Hope* – 1991) is, among other things, a certain narrowness of focus that deals almost exclusively with the situation of young black males. Depictions of the intricate interplay of racial, ethnic and social tensions in and around an urban center connected with an examination of economic relations in that particular municipal area, or the question of corruption of political life with its wheeling and dealing behind the scenes are not their primary material. Also, it remains to be seen what the same conditions, as seen from a female perspective and centering on a female character, would look like.²

Conspicuously absent from the three movies are also other races, particularly the whites. They enter the world of the hood in their police cars, as soldiers of an enemy nation that has subjugated and occupied black Los Angeles. This is their major contribution to the construction of African American identity: they are the ones that contribute to the feeling of everybody's entrapment. (Notice the similarity with their role in the rap video clips.) Cops, social workers, always part of the oppressive system, never partners (except partners in crime) or friends. Apart from that, they are just absent.

A New Blaxploitation?

In the early seventies, Hollywood responded to the remarkable success of Melvin van Peebles' film *Sweet Sweetback Baadaass Song* and Gordon Park's *Shaft* by producing a wave of formulaic films about black supermen and superwomen, a shrewd and unscrupulous move that came to be referred to as blaxploitation. The recent wave of films set in the ghetto prompts a similar question: are we witnessing a new version of blaxploitation, just with more social undertones? Do the filmmakers present us with another predictable formula, this time round set against the backdrop of decaying urban centers, boosted with a popular gangsta rap soundtrack and shots that bear a marked resemblance to the style

² So far, there do not seem to be many well-known features that would focus on the black female experience in the ghetto. Leslie Harris' debut *Just another Girl on the I.R.T.* (1992) has been unfortunately made all but invisible by the male-dominated "Boyz and others;" the other film that comes to mind, Darnell Martin's entertaining, humorous and yet insightful *I Like It Like That* (1994), centers around the character of a Latina.

of current rap video clips? In her article *Black American Cinema: The New Realism*, Manthia Diawara states the opposite. In her view, blaxploitation heroes in the earlier films remain unchanged, unaffected by the development of the narrative; it is quite true that the final shots of Richard Roundtree as Shaft clearly demonstrate the same macho stud we saw at the beginning. Having by himself eliminated about two dozen mafiosi and in the meantime having had several "chicks" in town (both white and black), he is absolutely devoid of any spiritual dimension: therefore it is easy to conclude that he has not grown. Tre and Bobby, on the contrary, did, Caine made some serious attempts. If the spiritual development of the main character is the criterion, then I must agree with Diawara that the films cannot be labeled as blaxploitation.

Nevertheless, the marked similarity of the new urban dramas has not remained unnoticed for long. The year 1995 saw the appearance of *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood*, a hilarious parody representing, according to Mick LaSalle of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, a "healthy spoof" of the ghetto narratives. The existence of this film suggests that some of the ghetto movies are reasonably well-known for the parody to be effective and that the ghetto films already constitute a distinct genre, with its uniform setting, predictable plot, character construction and a limited array of possible narrative developments. Thus the parody points at the existence of certain preprocessed formulas which, if applied over and over, can become dangerous, heading toward another kind of "blaxploitation." Even the theme of "spiritual growth" can be used endlessly till it becomes just another cliché. In this sense one can agree with Mick LaSalle that the parody brings a relief. "Things might be bad, but they're not so bad you can't laugh."

Conclusion

In this article, I have compared three recent American films (*Boyz N the Hood*, *South Central* and *Menace II Society*), urban dramas dealing with problems of life in the predominantly African American neighborhood of South Central Los Angeles. In particular, I have focused on the question of the cinematic construction of male identity. Indeed, among the many features the films share, the theme of spiritual growth of a young male protagonist appears to be the dominant one. I have arrived at a certain typology of their male characters, distinguishing among them three distinct groups: the young heroes, the mythical father figures or givers of advice, and the victims of the society. Among the young heroes of *Boyz N the Hood* and *South Central*, one can follow the development from passivity toward more activity, independence in thought and non-violence. Contrary to this, the protagonist of *Menace II Society* remains largely passive, incapable of change, and as a consequence of this shortcoming he dies. What on the surface appears as a contradictory line of development on the part of the individual characters in fact reinforces a largely identical answer: to

break the spell of the vicious circle of life in the “hood” one must become (and have) a responsible father. This, however, represents only a personal solution while the ghetto’s larger social ills remain beyond remedy (as the successful survivors just move out).

Furthermore, I have tried to comment on how the individual narratives and their protagonists’ identities are determined by traditional requirements of mainstream Hollywood cinema. In this respect, *South Central* offers the most reassuring, least problematic development. The plausibility of some moments in *Boyz N the Hood* suffers from the film’s very obvious didacticism, which from a purely “aesthetic” point of view might be viewed as a flaw. From the point of view of plausibility as well as from the point of view of the cinematic craft, however, I would see *Menace II Society* as the most mature feature of this group. It provides a very shocking picture of “hood” life, but at the same time is much less cynical than one might assume. As I suggested above, *Menace II Society* shares with the other two films an expression of urgent warning. All three films are on the one hand marked by apparent simplifications of a very complex social reality and a certain ideological uniformity of a markedly patriarchal nature, on the other hand, however, can be viewed as positive efforts to provide at least some answers to the devastating social conditions of the American urban ghetto.

In the final section of the article I have compared the recent boom of the “hood” narratives to the 1970s’ rise of the so-called blaxploitation in American cinema. Although at the moment we could still dismiss such charges, a certain amount of caution is probably advisable. The existence of the new parody *Don’t Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* can be used as an entertaining reminder that the danger of slipping into the convenient embrace of a ready-made formula is always there.

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