

**Excavating the Ghetto Action Cycle (1991-1996):  
A Case Study for a Cycle-Based Approach to Genre Study**

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University of Pittsburgh, 2007

The following dissertation, “Excavating the Ghetto Action Cycle (1991-1996): A Case Study for a Cycle-based Approach to Genre Theory,” traces an historical, cultural and theoretical genealogy for the ghetto action cycle. This controversial cycle, which was initiated by the success of films like *Boyz N the Hood* and *Menace II Society*, participated in the period’s broad cultural debates about race, class, crime and youth. As film cycles are strongly shaped by audience desire, financial viability, current events and studio whims, I argue that they retain the marks of their historical, socioeconomic and generic contexts more precisely than genres, which, because of their longevity and heterogeneity, can be unwieldy objects of study. My dissertation therefore advances a cycle-based approach to genre theory, illuminating the significance of the film cycle, its function within popular culture and its centrality to genre studies. Structured by the belief that viewers have a wide range of interpretive choices in any viewing situation, my dissertation employs multiple paradigms for reading the ghetto action cycle—principally, the gangster genre, the 1930s Dead End Kids cycle, the 1950s juvenile delinquent teenpic cycle and the 1970s blaxploitation cycle. Each chapter is also a specific application of a cycle-based approach to genre studies, emphasizing in the historicity of genre formations and theorizing about the significance and function of the film cycle in defining genres, articulating social problems, shaping subcultures and exploiting contemporary prejudices. Furthermore, all of the cycles examined were conceived during key moments of transition in American history—the

Progressive movement of the 1910s and 1920s, the beginnings of America's involvement in WWII, the birth of the teenager, the 1970s Black Nationalist movement, and the drug and gang banger crises of the early 1990s. Thus, close readings, not just of the films, but of the films in the context of their cycles, offer new ways of understanding how the popular imagination interprets moments of social change, and how the film industry seeks to capitalize upon these interpretations.

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## PREFACE

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Greenville, NC

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## **INTRODUCTION: LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT, OR TOWARDS A THEORY OF FILM CYCLES**

“A ‘B’ picture isn’t a big picture that didn’t grow up; it’s exactly what it started out to be. It’s the twenty-two dollar suit of the clothing business, it’s the hamburger of the butchers’ shops, it’s a seat in the bleachers.”

Veteran B picture director Nick Grinde, 1946 (qtd. in Taves 332)

### **EXCAVATING THE GHETTO ACTION CYCLE**

With the exception of Spike Lee films like *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986), *School Daze* (1988) and the commercial and critical hit, *Do the Right Thing* (1989), the 1980s was a fairly “white” time for mainstream Hollywood cinema. And given that the 1970s saw an abundance of films written, directed, starring and/or targeted at African American audiences (labeled collectively as the blaxploitation cycle), it was all the more shocking when black faces disappeared almost entirely from the nation’s multiplexes only a few years later. This is not to say that black actors were completely absent during the reign of the Reagan administration; A-listers like Eddie Murphy, Richard Pryor and Whoopi Goldberg starred in mainstream comedy/action releases like *48 Hours* (1982, Walter Hill), *Stir Crazy* (1980, Sidney Poitier) and *Jumpin’ Jack Flash* (1986, Penny Marshall) throughout the decade. However, in contrast to 1970s blaxploitation heroes, the characters in these 1980s blockbusters always had to share the spotlight with their white

“buddies,” who placed them, to quote Ed Guerrero, in “protective custody” (128). Guerrero argues that in these films white audiences are treated to the filmic pleasures of the black man (or woman) portrayed as a buffoon or subordinate as a corrective to the images of aggression and overt sexuality of the 1970s (128-130). Take, for example, *The Toy* (1982, Richard Donner), in which Richard Pryor, the subversive comic celebrated throughout the 1970s for his unabashed take on America’s race relations, becomes the plaything of a wealthy, white child. The film’s tagline even (unintentionally) references Pryor’s status as a comic prop to be bought and sold by the white studios: “When Jackie Gleason told his son he could have any present he wanted, he picked the most outrageous gift of all... Richard Pryor!” (“The Toy”).

This absence of diverse cinematic images of African Americans changed in 1991, when a series of independent films by black directors and dealing with “black themes” were all slated for release at once—including titles like *Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash), *Livin’ Large* (Michael Schultz) and *Boyz N the Hood* (John Singleton)—a phenomenon which generated an abundance of press coverage on the subject of African American filmmaking. The general tone of this coverage balanced excitement for the future of black cinema with tentativeness about what black filmmakers should do with their newfound Hollywood clout. A *Los Angeles Times* article from 1991 is characteristic of the early coverage of this so-called “black film boom”: “In an era still dominated by special effects extravaganzas and feel-good romance and comedy, these black-themed films provide some of the most compelling social and political material in Hollywood today” (Easton 1). The article goes on to quote Henry Louis Gates, a prominent professor of African American studies, who believes that the 1990s marks the first time that a group of black filmmakers “not only make social statements,” but “are also concerned about charting the contours of African-American culture, revealing what black people say to each other

in moments of intimacy” (2). While Gates’ comment is not historically accurate (black filmmakers have been creating an “intimate” cinema about the black experience since the teens), it does highlight how politically and culturally significant this black film boom was, particularly in the wake of the white-washed 1980s. African American critic Armond White wrote in the pages of *Essence* “By the end of 1991 there will have been more Black commercial films made than in the entire eighties decade. We are in the middle of something incredible.” Of course, with all of this attention focused on the black film making community, there was a mounting anxiety about the *kinds* of films that would be made. Spike Lee was quoted as saying: “This is a critical time for black cinema, which really, is in its infancy...This opportunity brings with it a special responsibility...So it’s important for new black filmmakers to be correct with their craft. If one black filmmaker messes up, the rest of us will be made to feel it” (qtd. in Bates 15). Here Lee illuminates how, at this time, all black filmmakers were suddenly lumped together, and the burden of responsibility this categorizing created for them.

Hollywood’s new open door policy to black filmmakers was, like all decisions made in the industry, rooted in strong economic incentives, specifically, the periodic marketability of black cultural productions. *New York Times* reporter Karen Grigsby Bates presciently noted in July of 1991: “The frenzy for black product that allowed [John] Singleton, who has no previous professional credits, to direct his own film has become so great that black film properties may be may be to the 90s what the car phone was to the 80s: every studio executive has to have one” (Bates 15). Bates was correct— in the 1990s African Americans appeared to have more directing, writing and acting opportunities than ever before (which is not, of course, saying very much). Even more exciting, unlike the blaxploitation cycle, the black film boom of the early 1990s encompassed a diversity of texts, styles, and perspectives, from

Reginald Hudlin's light-hearted, mainstream-targeted teenpic, *House Party* (1990), to Charles Lane's almost silent black and white homage to Charlie Chaplin, *Sidewalk Stories* (1990) to Robert Townsend's glossy, fictional account of a singing quintet, *The Five Heartbeats* (1991). This plurality of voices, which admittedly, included few female directors, inspired a general sense of hopefulness about the possibilities of contemporary black cinema. As one *Newsweek* article put it "The emergence of a vibrant black cinema has been both inevitability and a recurring item on our national wish list. In bad times, the so-called boom, forever sighted around the corner, provides a very conspicuous counterargument (or fantasy) of black progress" (Leland, et al. "New Jack Cinema"). In other words, there was more at stake in this increase in black cinematic production than just a diversity of faces on the screen; there was hopefulness that a change in the film industry was a harbinger of bigger things. *This time*, critics, pundits and filmmakers argued, the black film renaissance will not be a flash in the pan, or worse, a repeat of the public relations disaster that was the 1970s blaxploitation cycle. As Charles Lane optimistically predicted "the Berlin Wall, having been pulled down, will not be re-erected" (qtd. in Bates 18).

In addition to the aforementioned diverse depictions of the African American experience, a distinct cycle of films, using similar characters, settings, themes, and even filmmaking styles, began to emerge from within this black film boom. This cycle, which I am calling the ghetto action film,<sup>1</sup> includes releases like *New Jack City* (1991, Mario Van Peebles), *Boyz N the Hood*, *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991, Matty Rich), *Juice* (1992, Ernest R. Dickerson), *South Central* (1992, Steve Anderson), *Menace II Society* (1993, Allen and Albert

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<sup>1</sup> This term was first used by S. Craig Watkins in his article "Ghetto Reelness: Hollywood Film Production, Black Popular Culture and the Ghetto Action Film Cycle" (2002). I have selected this term since it does not favor any of the paradigms (gangster film, social problem film, teenpic, blaxploitation, music video) this dissertation will be using to read the cycle.

Hughes), *Fresh* (1994, Boaz Yakin), *Clockers* (1995, Spike Lee) *New Jersey Drive* (1995, Nick Gomez) and *Set it Off* (1996, F. Gary Gray). Ghetto action films are set in the city, or more specifically, the cinematic and social space known as the “ghetto,” and focus on the lives of young black men<sup>2</sup> who are either directly or indirectly involved in a criminal lifestyle (drug dealing, gang banging, armed robbery, car jacking, etc.) As a result of this rampant criminality and random violence, characters in these films (even those involved in crime) express a strong desire to “get out of the ‘hood” by any means possible. Not all of the characters who wish to leave their so-called urban prisons are able to do so, which is why these films are characterized by a pervasive sense of tragedy, thwarted desires and broken spirits. Indeed, ghetto action films almost always contain a violent set piece which centers on the demise of a character to which we have become attached. These untimely deaths (we rarely see characters dying “natural” deaths in the ghetto action cycle) are intended to illustrate the high stakes of living in America’s ghettos when you are both poor and black.

Like *Sidewalk Stories* and *House Party*, films like *Boyz N the Hood* and *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, took just one of several perspectives on the contemporary African American experience. But film critics, academics, audiences and filmmakers alike were especially excited about these films since they generated awareness about a pressing social problem. Given the state of contemporary American city in the early 1990s, a space believed to be rife with poverty, joblessness, drug abuse, violence and organized gang activity,<sup>3</sup> many pundits, critics and artists, both within and outside the African American community, felt that the ghetto action cycle could

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<sup>2</sup> And occasionally, as in *Set it Off*, black women.

<sup>3</sup> Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, co-authors of *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything* (2006), describe the frightening criminal climate of the early 1990s: “a graph plotting the crime rate in any American city over recent decades looked like a ski slope in profile—and it seemed now to herald the end of the world as we knew it. Death by gunfire, intentional and otherwise, had become commonplace. So too had carjacking and crack dealing, robbery and rape. Violent crime was a gruesome, constant companion. And things were about to get even worse...All the experts were saying so” (1).

be effective in both generating a more empathetic social awareness of these problems and speaking to those who might be tempted to turn to violence as a solution to the dire living conditions in the inner city. John Singleton called his own filmmaking debut “the first realistic portrait of what it’s like to be young, Black and American in the ‘90s” (“Angry, assertive and aware”). Warrington Hudlin, co-founder of the Black Filmmaker Foundation, agreed with Singleton’s assessment of *Boyz N the Hood*, stating soon after the film’s release that “the fact of the matter is we have in our communities around America a very violence-prone underclass, and they’re violence-prone because they’re very angry, they feel disenfranchised...And I think the only way to effectively reach them is through motion pictures like ‘Boyz N the Hood.’” (qtd. in Kempley G1). The films of the ghetto action cycle, which reflected, exploited but also generated the broad cultural debates about race, class, crime and youth which dominated the late 1980s and early 1990s, represented more than just a commercial success; they were characteristic of the possibilities of an American national cinema, identifying not an ideal of national culture but its underside. There was a hopefulness surrounding these films, a sense that American cinema was potentially moving away from the blockbuster and towards a goal that did not entail selling T-shirts, action figures and Happy Meals. Perhaps *these* films could kick start the American film renaissance many movie fans had been hankering for since the 1970s’ brief flirtation with independent voices and countercultural themes.

Ultimately, of course, these hopes were not realized. The ghetto action cycle proved extremely controversial and problematic, not only for the black film boom and its participating filmmakers, but for the urban black population as a whole. As I will discuss in detail in Chapter 4, the ghetto action cycle, particularly in the exhibition of its first three entries—*New Jack City*, *Boyz N the Hood* and *Juice*—were plagued with random outbursts of

shootings, stabbings and fist fights in and around theaters where the films were playing. Such incidents are not unprecedented at movie screenings; films like *The Godfather III* (1990, Francis Ford Coppola) and *The Warriors* (1979, Walter Hill) were also linked with incidents of violence at the time of their release. However, the fact that in the space of one year three films dealing with violent subjects and directed by black males all generated real life aggression and injury was enough to keep the media busy for months. Headline after headline announced “The Violent Birth of Hip-Hop Cinema” (Mills G1) or wondered “What’s Behind the Black-on-Black Violence at Movie Theaters?” (Collier). And with these headlines came the inevitable critical backlash. Academics like Jacquie Jones lamented what she saw as “The New Ghetto Aesthetic,” and even the filmmakers responsible for making these films became annoyed with the nation’s obsession with films depicting violent, young, black males killing and being killed. For instance, in a 1994 interview with *Ebony* Spike Lee<sup>4</sup> complained, “When is the last time you saw a film about a Black family with a father, a family that was not dysfunctional, where nobody’s on crack and the kids aren’t in gangs?” (qtd. in Norment). And, when Julie Dash attempted to find distribution for *Daughters of the Dust*, her period piece about a Gullah community living in South Carolina, at the 1991 Sundance film festival, she was told by a Japanese distributor “That’s not real black people” (qtd. in Lowery). By the end of 1991, the Berlin Wall was, in a manner of speaking, re-erected. Rather than the diversity of voices represented by filmmakers like Spike Lee, Julie Dash, Robert Townsend and Charles Lane, black filmmaking in the 1990s soon became synonymous with the ghetto action cycle, that is, with violence, hypermasculinity, sorrow, rage and pain. Consequently, these were the only projects that studios wanted out of up and coming black directors.

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<sup>4</sup> After *Do The Right Thing*, Spike Lee went on to make a series of films in various genres and settings, including *Mo’ Better Blues* (1990), *Summer of Sam* (1999), *Bamboozled* (2006), and *Inside Man* (2006).

It was this lauded birth and tumultuous childhood that initially drew me to study the ghetto action cycle. Fans of the cycle argued that these films were telling a story that had never been told and that *needed* to be told, given the dire socioeconomic conditions found in America's inner cities in the early 1990s. Critics of the cycle retorted that these films glorified violence, misogyny, homophobia, all while playing into and perpetuating stereotypes of/about young black males, who were already being demonized in the media. How could one relatively small film cycle generate so much controversy? Where did these filmmakers find their cinematic inspiration? What happened to these films after 1996, when the cycle seemed to disappear altogether? And did the ghetto action cycle leave a visual, thematic, cultural or industrial legacy? In the following chapters I will address these questions by tracing a detailed aesthetic, historical, cultural and theoretical genealogy for the ghetto action cycle, "excavating" its primary filmic source materials, including the gangster genre (chapter 1), the social problem film (chapter 2), the 1950s juvenile delinquent teenpic cycle (chapter 3), the 1970s blaxploitation cycle (chapter 4) and the contemporary hip hop music video (chapter 5). Each of these sources represents a specific lens for viewing the ghetto action cycle, making visible just one of several possible readings of this group of texts.

For example, *Boyz N the Hood* finds its roots in the melodramatic redemption narratives located in silent gangster films like *The Regeneration* (1915, Raoul Walsh). In these texts the criminal, whom the film tells us is the product of his environment, is educated by a prosocial character and then ultimately chooses the "correct" path in the film's conclusion. However, *Boyz N the Hood* is also firmly rooted in the tradition of the social problem film and its ultimate goal of illuminating a pervasive and complicated social problem located at the forefront of the public imagination and offering that public a simplistic, reassuring solution. Additionally, *Boyz N the Hood* is part of Hollywood's ongoing goal of targeting and appealing to the contemporary youth zeitgeist, a goal revealed when *Boyz N the Hood* is understood as part of the

teenpic's historical trajectory. Finally, *Boyz N the Hood* is part of a long cinematic tradition, dating back to the 1910s, in which images of blackness are created and sold to both an image-starved black audience, but also to non-black audiences fascinated by these images. *Boyz N the Hood* is a part of all of these various histories, a fact that would be lost if it were viewed through just one single lens. My project knits together all of these distinct readings to provide a richer, albeit more complicated, understanding of the winding path an image or trope travels, and the meanings it takes on, abandons and distorts as it circulates through different films.

By approaching the ghetto action cycle from a diversity of sources, I am able to address, not just the films themselves, but also their political, social and aesthetic function in American culture. The films composing this cycle have been analyzed in various ways in a diverse range of texts, including Ed Guerrero's *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (1993), S. Craig Watkins' *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (1998), Paula Massood's *Black City Cinema* (2003), Keith Harris' *Boys, Boyz, Bois: The Ethics of Black Masculinity in Film and Popular Media* (2005) and Celeste A. Fisher's *Black On Black: Urban Youth Films and the Multicultural Audience* (2006), not to mention numerous articles in both academic journals and more mainstream-oriented publications. While these texts have approached ghetto action films in many ways—in terms of their relationship with hip hop culture, their emphasis on an urban setting, their construction of and mediation on black masculinity and the ways in which multicultural students understand and react to these films—none of these insightful studies have analyzed these films *as* a coherent film cycle. What I hope my work contributes to that already completed on these films is an understanding of the factors leading to the creation, marketing and demise of the ghetto action cycle, and the multiplicity of meanings that circulated in and around these films, both at the time of their release and today

## THEORIZING THE FILM CYCLE

In addition to tracing the history and meanings of the images and themes found in a particular film cycle, this project is also a theorization of the film cycle itself. Drawing on innovative genre studies like Rick Altman's *Film/Genre* (1999) and Steve Neale's *Genre and Hollywood* (2000), this dissertation seeks to reevaluate the foundations of genre theory by questioning how generic structures have been traditionally defined and understood by turning to the relatively unexamined phenomenon of the film cycle. A film cycle is a series of films which are associated with one another due to the fact that they contain similar subjects, images and themes, and occasionally even similar actors, directors and screenwriters. Film cycles are predicated upon the financial and critical success of one or two films, which quickly inspires a series of imitators. For example, in 2004, the serial killer film *Saw* (James Wan), which included a series of gory torture sequences, was a huge box office hit, earning over \$55 million (though the film cost only \$1.2 million to make). Given the financial success of the film, studios pounced on the idea, releasing gory, slash and torture films like *Hostel* (2005, Eli Roth), *Saw II* (2005, Darren Lynn Bousman), *The Devil's Rejects* (2005, Rob Zombie), *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006, Alexandre Aja), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* (2006, Jonathan Liebesman), and of course, *Saw III* (2006, Darren Lynn Bousman) and *Hostel II* (2007, Eli Roth). Often later films in a cycle are posited as "sequels" to an earlier more successful film, even if the cast, directors, or writers used in the sequel are different from those used in the original film. For example, *Saw II* employed a different director and a different cast from the original (which makes sense since almost every character died in the first film), retaining only the premise of the Jigsaw killer. Audiences did not seem to mind this change, since *Saw II* made even more money (\$87 million) than the original.

Since cycles exist in order to capitalize upon the success of a particular cinematic formula, their *raison d'être* is their resemblance to, rather than their difference from, previous films. The producers behind these films want audiences to associate their product with other, similar products within the cycle—but only as long as that particular cycle remains successful. For example, Fine Line, the studio behind *Hangin' with the Homeboys* (1991, Joseph B. Vasquez), delayed the film's release because they were fearful that the film would be associated, negatively, with the ghetto action cycle. Fine Line's president, Ira Deutchman, explained "the marketplace is too crowded with films going to black audiences...[*Hangin'*] is really an entirely different kind of film that needs to stand on its own merit" (qtd. in Toumarkine). In this case, being associated with a contemporary cycle was a liability. Thus, film cycles, unlike film genres, are strongly tied to both time (cycles "live" for a short amount of time) and economics (their appearance and disappearance are a direct result of their immediate financial viability). Of course, early entries in a cycle are not necessarily created to capitalize upon the success of an originary film; rather, the similarities between these early films are usually the result of some sociocultural cue (a new trend, a social concern, a political movement, a defining world event, etc.). For example, although *New Jack City* predates *Boyz N the Hood* by a few months, the latter was not created to capitalize on the former. Instead, both films are a reaction to certain sociocultural issues: the devastation of the nation's inner cities, the national interest in rap music and black cultural production, etc. However, later entries in the ghetto action cycle, like *Menace II Society*, exploited the momentum generated by these earlier films.

Using the ghetto action cycle, an example of a lucrative, visible and highly controversial film cycle, as my case study, this dissertation investigates previously unexamined questions like: how and why do film cycles form? Why do they thrive, despite their inherently

derivative nature, and why do they disappear? What is the relationship between a film cycle and the culture(s) for which it was created and/or which it exploits? How are cycles different from genres? Why might it be productive to approach the field of genre studies through the film cycle, which is capable of being both a local structure and a lens for viewing a broader, global range of texts? And finally, why is it that film genres have now achieved a cultural status worthy of book length studies, detailed theoretical models and entire courses devoted to their social, mythical and ideological functions,<sup>5</sup> while film cycles are still viewed primarily as moneymaking structures catering to simple or low brow tastes? Why has the discipline of film studies ignored the film cycle? Each chapter is devoted to theorizing about the significance and utility of the film cycle in defining film genres, articulating and disseminating beliefs about contemporary social problems, shaping deviant subcultures and exploiting and reflecting upon racial and political upheaval.

Since it is beyond the scope of this introduction to engage in a nuanced review of the central premises of genre studies, I will instead be addressing some of the areas of genre studies into which cycle studies might productively intervene. The first question we should ask about the field of genre studies is: why does the discipline of film studies engage in genre theory at all—what does the study of genre add to our understanding of film history, theory and criticism? Simply put, the aim of genre studies is to bring order, structure and stability to a group of texts sharing similar characteristics so that these texts can be studied collectively and comparatively. As Rick Altman argues in *The American Film Musical* (1987): “the single text is no more interpretable by itself than an ancient document representing the sole surviving text in

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<sup>5</sup> It was not until the 1970s that genre films were taken seriously in the discipline of film studies. Today, many genres, including the comedy, the action film and certain science fiction films, are still generally viewed as low brow texts.

its language...The categories operative in a given text can be made visible only by the conflation of numerous films of the same genre” (108). While, for example, *Little Caesar* (1930, Mervyn LeRoy) is, with the exception of Edward G. Robinson’s charismatic performance, a fairly unremarkable film on its own (static direction, leaden action sequences and a wooden script), it becomes a far more meaningful text when understood as a part of the larger gangster genre. When we read *Little Caesar* as a gangster film and in conversation with other gangster films released around the same time, like *Underworld* (1928, Josef von Sternberg) or *Scarface* (1932, Howard Hawks), certain significant characteristics emerge: its use of a doomed protagonist, its mediation on the American Dream, the demise that the gangster must endure for transgressing social boundaries, etc. For this critic at least, genre studies acts as a key, opening up a world of meanings and connections not readily visible when a text is read in isolation, including: “economic and historical contexts (conditions of production and consumption), conventions and mythic functions (semiotic codes and structural patterns), and the place of particular filmmakers within genres (tradition and the individual auteur)” (Grant xvii). Steve Neale adds that genre studies came about in the 1970s because there was “a desire to engage in a serious and positive way with popular cinema in general and with Hollywood in particular”<sup>6</sup> as well as “a desire to complement, temper or displace altogether the dominant critical approach used hitherto—auteurism” (10).

Barry Keith Grant bolsters this perspective, noting that genre is “a useful conceptual tool for understanding popular film as both art and artifact” (xvi). Grant’s term, “artifact,” is, in fact, central to my understanding of genres because genre films are not just

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<sup>6</sup> Here I should point out that cinema studies inherited the concept of genre studies from other academic disciplines, particularly literature and art history. Borrowing critical tools from fields which already garnered prestige conferred respectability to genre studies and to cinema studies as a whole.

aesthetic documents to view and enjoy, they also serve as visual and aural records of the social, economic and political contexts in which they were made. Nevertheless, a major problem with genre studies, and the one with which I hope, cycle studies might intervene, is precisely this question of history. That is, when we discuss a genre film in terms of its deep thematic structures we are presuming that these thematic structures are unchanging and so we tend to affix static meanings to the text. According to this perspective, whether a gangster film is released in 1931 or 2001, it will retain the same thematic structure or syntax: the individual versus society. If a film does not contain this theme, then it is not *truly* a gangster film. To put it another way, each film genre contains a stable grammar or *langue*, “a system of rules of expression and construction,” while each individual genre film represents an individual utterance or *parole*, a “manifestation of these rules” (Schatz 19). Yet, as Thomas Schatz points out, the language analogy is not entirely appropriate when discussing film genres: “Grammar in language is absolute and static, essentially unchanged by the range and abuses of everyday usage. In the cinema, however, individual genre films seem to have the capacity to affect the genre—an utterance has the potential to change the grammar that governs it” (19). While all gangster films are expected to share a common grammar, that is, a deep structure of meaning, over time this grammar is ever so slightly revised. This explains why gangster films made in the 1930s are quite different from those made in the 1990s: “Genres evolve, and they tend to evolve quite rapidly due to the demands of commercial popular media” (20). Thus, the fundamental question of history—the fact that genre films exist in relation to a very real social, economic and political context—is ultimately solved in genre studies with the concept of generic evolution.

Generic evolution, a concept I will address in more detail in Chapter 1, is the idea that a film genre will undergo a predictable development over time. There are two general

models of generic change espoused in genre studies. The first model sees film genres as living things that are born, mature, become “disillusioned” and then finally, die. The second model is closely related, arguing that art forms do not just change over time, they actually *evolve*. This idea of the evolution of art forms was first addressed by Henri Focillon in the book *The Life of Forms in Art* (1942), which argues that cultural forms have a predictable life span, moving from a period of experimentation, to equilibrium and then on to increasingly self-conscious forms.<sup>7</sup> Both paradigms proffer the idea that early examples of a genre will be more “naïve” or more experimental (depending on which model of change is consulted), while more recent examples of a genre tend to be more self-aware and critical of the very genre of which they are an expression. Furthermore, the term “evolution” implies that later examples of a genre will somehow be “better”—more intelligent, more complex, more self-aware—than earlier examples. But as Rick Altman points out:

Designed to account for variety within a genre’s overall homogeneity, these evolutionary schemes paradoxically stress generic predictability more than variation...This tendency to subordinate history to continuity by restricting change to prescribed limits helps us to understand the sleight of hand whereby genre history can regularly be written without contradicting genre’s transhistorical nature. Like railroad tracks, teleological history assures that genres will be free only to shuttle back and forth between experimentation and reflexivity. (22)

To argue for an evolutionary model is to argue that a film genre is only capable of growing in one direction—in a stylistic straight line from youth to old age, from naiveté to cynicism. But a genre film, no matter how “old”, is nonetheless an independent entity and is not bound to follow

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<sup>7</sup> See also Christian Metz’s chapter “Textuality and ‘Singularity’” in *Language and Cinema* (1974).

any particular “rules” in terms of which conventions it chooses to deploy, when it deploys them and in what mode. No genre has ever moved in linear fashion from innocence to self reflexivity without making several steps backward as well as several detours into other generic possibilities. To be sure, many genres experience moments of self reflexivity relatively early in their life span, only to return to a period of more straight forward generic depictions. Thus, as an explanatory tool, the evolutionary model is ahistorical—it is only able to account for certain films at certain moments in time. This model bends history to the needs of the interpretative frame being used; when, for example, a genre film does not fit into the expected model of change for its genre—like the early, self reflexive Western, *Hell Bent* (1918, John Ford) –it is ignored or explained away in order to maintain the integrity of the original theory (Gallagher 206).

This particular counterexample to generic evolution was one among many addressed in Tag Gallagher’s “Shoot-Out at the Genre Corral: Problems in the ‘Evolution’ of the Western” (1986), a piece which examines and questions the evolutionary models discussed by prominent genre and/or Western scholars like Thomas Schatz, Will Wright, Frank McConnell, Leo Braudy, John Cawelti, and others by returning to the question of history. What he ultimately discovers is that, contrary to what these critics have argued, the Western *does not* follow an evolutionary model in which early texts are earnest and straight-forward and later texts are more self conscious and cynical.<sup>8</sup> Gallagher therefore concludes that: “A superficial glance at film history suggests cyclicism rather than evolution” (208). Consequently, genres go through periods of self-reflexivity and periods of earnestness or conservatism, and these periods can recur

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<sup>8</sup> Gallagher rightly acknowledges that, in general, all contemporary films are more self reflexive: “while it is undoubtedly true that each age’s westerns reflect each age, and that westerns of recent years, *like almost every film made*, evince sorts of violence, pornography, and cynicism that probably were not present to the same degree in the same ways during the 1940s, little evidence has been brought forward to support the theory that there has been growing ‘self consciousness’—or any other sort of linear evolution—in and specific to the western” (204).

throughout the life of a genre (as opposed to moving through these stages in a linear fashion).

Other recent works in the field of genre studies have begun to attend to this fundamental question of history. *Refiguring Film Genres: Theory and History* (1998), for example, is a collection of essays which addresses the historicity of genre formations by analyzing the constitution of film genres, investigating how our understanding of genre changes when history is consulted and analyzing “the industrial life cycle of a genre through commodification and of the changing cultural politics of genre criticism” (Browne xii).

My project takes a similar approach to genre studies, only I apply these methodologies to the concept of the film cycle. I argue that, rather than a linear or teleological model of change, film genres are more accurately described as a series of cycles highlighting dominant concerns in both the genre and the culture at large. Thus cycles may exist on their own, as part of a larger genre or as a little of both.<sup>9</sup> Change is not predetermined by preset patterns of evolution, but rather, by the needs and conditions of history.<sup>10</sup> In the case of the gangster film, these cycles might be centered around the development of new technology, such as sound in the early 1930s (*Scarface*), industry censorship (which led to G-Man films in the mid-1930s like *G-Men* [1935, William Keighley]), other popular film movements (*noir* gangster hybrids in 1940s and 1950s like *The Big Combo* [1955, Joseph H Lewis]), changes in world politics, such as the activation of youth counterculture politics in the late 1960s (*Bonnie and Clyde* [1967, Arthur Penn]) or prevalent social fears (leading to the creation of the ghetto action cycle in the 1990s), which are taken up cyclically throughout the genre’s life, but never in the same way or for the

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<sup>9</sup> For example, the ghetto action cycle is a stand alone film cycle, however, several ghetto action films (*New Jack City*, *Menace II Society*, *Set it Off*) can be read as part of the gangster genre.

<sup>10</sup> Nick Browne argues that genres are hardly stable: “genre is, tacitly, a loose assemblage of cultural forms shaped by social conflict and historical vicissitude...Generic change in several of these essays is figured as a process in which constituencies seek, assert, control, or oppose popular representation” (xiii).

same reasons. In other words, a cycle is composed of and shaped by multiple converging variables—the current popularity of an actor, director, or filmmaking style, contemporary politics, industry conditions, audience desires, as well as all the various cycles which preceded it (both within that genre and in other genres)—which harmonize for a brief period of time, forming a successful film cycle. This film cycle can then redistribute its generic elements to new cycles, or combine with previous cycles within and outside its genre, to create yet another cycle.

Likewise, these cycles do not follow each other from oldest to most recent, as the evolutionary model of generic development implies. Instead, a film cycle is a web of heterogeneous texts in which every text is connected to and engaged in the process of influencing, every other text. One film within a cycle is not so much an imitation of its predecessors, as it is a part of them—a later text helps us to understand and perhaps even to *rename* an earlier text in the cycle. As a result, cycles are free to change their labels and their corpus over time, to grow and change long after they are initially defined. In Chapter 2 I will map out what patterns of cycle formation and evolution look like and how they function through a case study of the ghetto action cycle and one of its sources, the Dead End Kids cycle. Finally, film cycles can be periodically revived. That is, although film cycles live for a short period of time in order to capitalize on the public's interest in a particular topic, certain cycles can recur throughout film history. For example, in the 1970s, there was a cycle of disaster films, including *Airport* (1970, George Seaton), *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972, Ronald Neame), *The Towering Inferno* (1974, John Guillermin and Irwin Allen), etc. And recently, there have been a series of films dealing with disasters and/or worldwide apocalypse, including *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004, Roland Emmerich), *War of the Worlds* (2005, Steven Spielberg), *Poseidon* (2006, Wolfgang Petersen), *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006, Davis Guggenheim), etc. Both the 1970s and

2000s mark a time when Americans were/are feeling anxious about the stability of the world—particularly the U.S.’s involvement in “quagmires” like Viet Nam and Iraq—and so it makes sense that these films, which tap directly into those feelings, would be successful at these two historical moments.

Attendant to the issue of history in genre studies is another fundamental problem: how does the student of genre go about defining a genre and/or figuring out which films to include in that genre’s corpus and which films to exclude? And what about films that appear to fit into multiple generic categories at once? Typically, when initiating a genre study a critic will first choose several films which are most clearly representative of that genre and then, using those texts as a guide, the critic can outline the genre’s primary semantics and syntax, a process which Andrew Tudor, in *Theories of Film* (1974), has labeled “the empiricist’s dilemma.” Tudor argues that the paradox of beginning a genre study is that the body of films composing a generic corpus “can only be isolated on the basis of the ‘principal characteristics,’ which can only be discovered from the films themselves after they have been isolated” (138). This quandary points to the often arbitrary nature of defining genres as well as to the fundamental role played by the critic in deciding which films and characteristics “count” as being part of a particular genre.

This model of genre studies can also be problematic because a genre ends up being defined by a few “central” or “classic” texts (i.e., those texts which conform to a particular critic’s definition of a particular genre). The concept of classic stage or classic text, derived from Focillon’s theory of evolution in art, is central to determining a genre’s characteristics since the classic text is thought to embody a genre’s images, characters and themes at their purest. As a result, a film like *Little Caesar* is often deemed to be a classic example of the gangster film while *Guys and Dolls* (1955, Joseph L. Mankiewicz) is considered less representative of the genre

because it includes so many elements of the film musical. In many ways, this approach to genre studies makes sense—how can a study of the gangster film be conducted if none of the texts being studied strongly adhere to the defined characteristics of the genre? As a result, the general tendency when initiating a genre study has been to ignore texts which complicate a genre’s accepted blueprint and which act as exceptions to the rule. As Rick Altman argues “However the privileged corpus of an individual genre is defined, one characteristic stands out: most genre critics prefer to deal with films that are clearly and ineluctably tied to the genre in question. No romantic mixed genres, no crossbreeds, no anomalies” (Altman 17). It is much easier to deal with “pure” examples of a genre than to address the mutations in the genre’s otherwise fixed genetic code. But again, this approach to genre is fundamentally ahistorical, marginalizing texts which could enrich, rather than detract from, our understanding of a genre, its context, its function and even its aesthetics. Furthermore, when it comes down to it, very few genre films, even the most classic and central of texts, closely adhere to the list of characteristics attributed to a genre’s classic texts.

In order to get around this problem it is necessary to take a different perspective on genres. Once a genre, its corpus and its central characteristics are sketched out (a necessary first step in any genre study),<sup>11</sup> we must step back from the “center” of a genre, where many genre studies begin and end, and instead venture out to the “borders” of the generic corpus, where the films that do not fully comply with the rules of their genre, like *Guys and Dolls*, reside. This entails acknowledging that border texts, such as Westerns which are not set in the West (*Drums Along the Mohawk* [1939, John Ford]), or gangster films in which the gangster lives to tell his tale (*Goodfellas* [1990, Martin Scorsese] and *The Sopranos* [1999-2007]) are as

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<sup>11</sup> Steve Neale argues that “while [taxonomic] writing of this kind has its limitations, it also has its uses, providing as it does an initial means of ‘collating the range of cultural knowledge...genres assumed’ (Gledhill 1985a: 61)” (12).

“characteristic” of their genres as the most central texts. Despite their inability to live up to all of the criteria of their genre (as defined by critics), border texts like *Drums Along the Mohawk* are still viewed by audiences and studios as being part of their respective genres; ask any gangster film aficionado if s/he believes that *Goodfellas* should not be considered a true gangster film and you will understand how genre films need not be technically “central” in order to be understood as significant to the genre. Though consideration of these border texts makes for a “messy,” complicated generic map that cannot be separated into neat columns, and for prose rife with unstable qualifying terms like “but,” “sometimes” and “not always,” this approach to genre, which confers as much significance to *The Sopranos* as *Scarface*, has, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 1, far more explanatory power than traditional studies.

For example, despite lacking the oft-cited “rise and fall” structure so central to the definition of the classic gangster film (see Robert Warshow, Jack Shadoian, etc), no serious student of the gangster film would consider excluding *The Public Enemy* (1931, William A. Wellman) from the genre’s corpus. Moreover, if we view the film’s focus on the “foot soldier” who never realizes the success of the Big Boss, as being a central convention of the genre, then the arrangement of our corpus begins to shift, bringing to light details which may remain hidden, such as other, heretofore unacknowledged sources of where the genre came from, what its major concerns are, and where the genre might be headed. In fact, Gerald Peary has noted that the narrative of the underling or foot soldier composes a “more significant group” of films than the tale of the Big Boss (*Little Caesar* 12), including films like *Mother’s Cry* (1930, Hobart Henley), *Sinner’s Holiday* (1930, John G. Adolphi) and *City Streets* (1931, Rouben Mamoulian). These films were being released at the same time as the gangster genre’s so-called classic cycle, starring actors like James Cagney, Sylvia Sidney and Gary Cooper, and yet this narrative is

almost always marginalized in relation to the classic “rise and fall” narrative. Those texts which have been considered “central” because they focus on the individual, the Big Boss, or the Don, like *Little Caesar*, *Scarface*, *The Roaring Twenties*, *Angels with Dirty Faces*, *The Godfather*, *Scarface* (1984, Brian DePalma), etc., who is a target precisely because he is at the top and because his desire for power overreaches his own capabilities, must now share that central space with other, supposedly marginal examples of the genre, like *High Sierra* (1941, Raoul Walsh), *Force of Evil* (1948, Abraham Polonsky), *The Killers* (1946, Robert Siodmak), *The Killing* (1956, Stanley Kubrick) *Point Blank* (1967, John Boorman), *Mean Streets* (1973, Martin Scorsese), *Atlantic City* (1980, Louis Malle), *Prizzi’s Honor* (1985, John Huston), *Miller’s Crossing* (1990, Coen Brothers), *Goodfellas*, *Reservoir Dogs* (1992, Quentin Tarantino), *Donnie Brasco* (1997, Mike Newell) and *Road to Perdition* (2002, Sam Mendes), all of which focus on the experiences and/or demise of the “foot soldier,” or the company man, who never reaches his “peak” in the way that a gangster like Tony Camonte (Paul Muni) does in *Scarface*. These films therefore offer a different perspective on the genre’s accepted syntax of the individual versus society. In these films we see how even the life of the gangster, which is so often glamorized in American cinema, is, like all jobs, a bit of a drag. While a few rise to the top, the majority of those engaged in the criminal lifestyle are just like us—they must follow orders, answer to a boss, and get paid very little in comparison to what their bosses are making. These films also reveal how the crime syndicate, like any big corporation, is prone to sapping employees of their youthful vitality and leaving them to subsist on paltry pensions in their old age. For example, during our last encounter with Corrado “Junior” Soprano (Dominic Chianese) in the *Sopranos’* series finale, the once powerful man sits, dentureless and demented, in a wheelchair in a state hospital for the criminally insane. When his nephew, Tony (James Gandolfini), tells him “You

and my Dad. You two ran New Jersey,” he replies “We did? That’s nice.” For all of Junior’s previous power and connections in the mob world, in old age he has become like any other lonely, dying man, leading the viewer to wonder “Was it all worth it?”

Here we can see how the monolithic definitions we apply to certain well known genres, such as the gangster genre, function to eliminate and thus dehistoricize the long rich tradition of meanings that have contributed to that genre over the course of its existence. This example also highlights how any given genre is less a static set of icons, formulas and conventions than it is a shifting combination of these fixtures that can appear in just one film, be repeated in a cycle, or become the new dominating trend in that particular genre. At any one point in a genre’s history it may look stable, well defined and timeless, while at other points it appears to have disappeared entirely (witness the “death” of the Western in the 1980s and 1990s). It is only when we consider a genre’s history and *all* of its texts—those which are central and those existing on its borders, that we get the full picture.

## **WHY HAVE FILM CYCLES BEEN IGNORED BY GENRE STUDIES?**

### **Issue # 1: Film Cycles are Unstable**

While there are many books, articles and college courses devoted to genre theory and film genres, taking approaches from the psychoanalytic to the anthropological to the ideological to the biological, thus far nothing substantial has been written or theorized about film cycles, unless they eventually “grew up” to be stable, responsible genres. Genres are believed to develop out of cycles only when they are able to establish a “balance” between a stable syntax, or underlying

thematic structure (i.e., the gangster film's syntax is the opposition between the needs of the individual and the needs of society), and a stable semantics, or a film's salient visual features or surface structure (i.e., the semantics of the gangster film includes the city setting, the use of the minority protagonist, the gangster's death at the film's conclusion, guns, cars, etc.): "Just as individual texts establish new meanings for familiar terms only by subjecting well-known semantic units to a syntactic redetermination, so generic meaning comes into being only through repeated deployment of substantially the same syntactic strategies" (Altman *Reader* 38). Accordingly, the Dead End Kids cycle, which retains a fairly stable semantics (the same troupe of actors, an urban setting, and plots in which the boys cause trouble and get caught) but not a stable syntax (early films in the cycle were social problem films while later examples ranged from comedies to horror films to Westerns to war propaganda), cannot be considered a "genre." Altman explains that only when a cycle of films reaches a "balance" between syntax and semantics, achieved through the ongoing process of genrification, are they understood, by both the audience and the studios, to be a genre. At this point the group of films becomes available for use by other studios: "Once a genre is recognized and practiced throughout the industry, individual studios have no further economic interest in practicing it as such...instead they seek to create new cycles by associating a new type of material or approach with an existing genre, thus initiating a new round of genrification" (*Film/Genre* 62). Altman argues that while genres are "shareable" between studios (no one "owns" the rights to the horror film), cycles are proprietary (the "Dead End Kids" go with whomever buys their contracts). Clearly this model changes with the demise of the studio system (~1917-1960), but the basic premise, that cycles are tied to time and economics, holds true in contemporary filmmaking practices. Cycles, poised between the possibilities of becoming stable genres or quickly dying off, are considered liminal structures and

as result, they do not receive much critical attention. After all, why study a structure that has yet to become what it *should be*?

I will argue that understanding and studying cycle formation is more revealing than the more conventional practice of studying “stable” genres because, even in the case of established genres like the Western or the gangster film, the presence of generic stability is often temporary and/or illusory. Despite this fact, genre theory has historically tended to focus on “stable” and established genres as primary, and cycles as secondary or as transitional texts which disrupt and/or complicate the often neat categorizations that can be uncovered in genre studies. Rick Altman points out that it is for this reason that genre studies frequently bypass the chaos of film history in favor of theoretical stability: “Where the theory of generic reception requires texts whose genres are immediately and transparently recognizable, the most interesting texts supplied by film history are complex, mobile and mysterious” (16). For example, in his seminal genre study, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System* (1981), Thomas Schatz identifies six major genres (gangster, Western, hard-boiled detective, musical, melodrama and screwball comedy) as objects of study. In order to categorize and define these genres, as well as chart their components into symmetrical columns (i.e., into “genres of order” and “genres of integration”), these genres must be stable and have firm boundaries. To achieve this goal, Schatz sticks to a discussion of only those films which support his theories; thus, his discussion of the gangster film is based almost completely on the “classic cycle,” and his discussion of comedy is only addressed through one cycle of the comedy, the “screwball comedy.” While Schatz’s conclusions are insightful and quite useful to the student of these genres, it must be clarified that these conclusions can only be productively applied to particular *cycles* of the gangster film and the comedy.

This dissertation argues that genre studies should *begin* with an understanding of cycles because cycles retain the marks of their historical, economic, and generic contexts more precisely than genres. Once and if a cycle establishes itself as a “stable genre” (again, this is a concept which will be questioned throughout this dissertation), the remnants of its path to genrification, the clues to its past, are smoothed over with use. Rick Altman points out that this search for generic stability tends to ignore the winding path(s) of genrification “Most genre studies cover their traces, erasing all evidence of the constitution of a corpus, the choice of categories, and the development of terminology, thus leaving the reader methodologically where he/she started, able only to borrow other people’s conclusions” (*American Film Musical* 126). Rather than as a “permanent product of singular origin” I see film cycles as a “temporary by-product of an on-going process” (*Film/Genre* Altman 54) or a map that “can never be completed, because it is a record not of the past, but of a living geography” (*Film/Genre* Altman 70). The “constantly shifting map of relations” which is the ghetto action film is still being formulated today, despite its disappearance from the realm of mainstream releases in 1996. Every film which attempts to tell the story of a black inner city youth who struggles (and often dies or loses a loved one) within or against the debilitating socioeconomics of the modern cinematic ghetto both expands the corpus of this cycle and retroactively alters the cycle’s definition. Even television sitcoms (like *Homeboys in Outer Space* [1996-1997]) and video games (like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* [2004]) participate in this constant expansion, consolidation and altering of the ghetto action cycle and its meanings. This concept of the “dialectic,” a process of communication between the old and the new, between studio and audience, between the visual and the thematic, is central to my understanding of ghetto action films in particular, and film cycles in general.

## Issue # 2: Film Cycles are Too Commercial/Too Low Brow

In *Genre and Hollywood* Steve Neale argues that: “the term ‘cycle’ is used...to refer to groups of films made within a specific and limited time span, and founded, for the most part, on the characteristics of individual commercial successes” (9). Here, Neale illuminates the central way in which film cycles are typically understood—as commercial products. For instance, *Boyz N the Hood*, the first entry in the ghetto action film cycle, made \$56 million at the box office and cost a mere \$6.5 million to make, and therefore its themes, conventions, style and imagery were duplicated in various forms until approximately 1996, when the production of these feature films appeared to stop. Here we see another reason for why film cycles are not studied—their intimate and readily apparent relationship with commercialism and profit. All of the cycles examined in this project (the melodramatic gangster cycle, the Dead End Kids cycle, the JD teenpic cycle, the blaxploitation cycle), have been denied a place in the canon of film theory, criticism and history.<sup>12</sup> As cultural ephemera, cranked out to capitalize on current events, trends, fads and/or the success of other films, film cycles are commonly viewed as transparent in their motives, deviant in their subject matter, low brow in their tastes, or in the case of blaxploitation, racist and damaging to an entire generation of people. In their seeming simplicity (take a successful formula and repeat it until it is no longer successful), film cycles do not seem worthy of the high brow motives often attributed to art films or even to some film genres, which are seen as tapping into timeless cultural mythologies or performing the function of mass rituals. In their baseness and obviousness, in their bald desire to give their audiences *exactly what they want*, film cycles

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<sup>12</sup> Aspects of the blaxploitation film cycle have received some thoughtful critical attention in recent years. See Paula Massood’s *Black City Cinema* (2003), Ed Guerrero’s *Framing Blackness* (1993) and Mark Reid’s *Redefining Black Film* (1993).

appear to deny the respectability that genre studies of the 1970s had promised to confer upon films previously dismissed as cookie cutter products on a studio production line.

Likewise, the contemporaneity of the film cycle, its emphasis on timeliness as opposed to timelessness, is precisely what links the institution of cinema with “low culture” and the masses. As Eric Schaefer has argued, the classical exploitation film<sup>13</sup> posed a threat to the mainstream film industry because it was diametrically opposed “to the definition of what constituted a ‘better film’.” Allied with the elevation of taste in the masses was the fear that the spread of the unwholesome or dirty, such as exploitation movies, might drag down the ‘good taste’ that the more refined had so carefully cultivated” (156). Always the bastard child of art, cinema has fought for a place in the echelons of the high brow, claiming that its products could—like *The Mona Lisa*—also be a timeless and classic art form. The cycle will continue to be produced only if it continues to sell and it will only continue to sell if it resonates with its consumers. As a result, the film cycle is rarely seen as art, but rather as a commodity to be made quickly, packaged and sold in a timely fashion. Filmmakers who associate their craft with high art would never make a film that capitalizes on the box office success of another film, by repeating its plots, characters and themes, or which appears to pander to the audience’s every whim. Thus, the film cycle, which makes its desire for profit plain, counteracts this quest for good taste in the cinema.

Another reason why the majority of the films covered in this dissertation (and film cycles in general) have been ignored is because of their ultimate link with accessibility, artlessness, and the untutored eye. In *Distinction* (1984), a study of the politics of taste, Pierre

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<sup>13</sup> The classic exploitation film is defined by several criteria: its depiction of a forbidden subject; its reliance on spectacle as its organizing sensibility; it is made cheaply with low production values; it frequently relies on stock footage to “pad” the film; and it is distributed independently or in theaters not associated with the majors (Schaefer *Bold!* 4-6). For more on the exploitation film, see Chapter 4.

Bourdieu argues that in matters of cultural taste there are primary or surface meanings and secondary or signified meanings. The latter is typically viewed as the “proper” way to approach a work of art while the former is instantly accessible and therefore considered to be a vulgar, naïve or facile form of knowledge or pleasure (2-3): “Thus the encounter with a work of art is not ‘love at first sight’ as is generally supposed, and the act of empathy *Einfühlung*, which is the art-lover’s pleasure, presupposes an act of cognition, a decoding operation, which implies the implementation of a cognitive acquirement, a cultural code” (3). This opposition between function and form, engagement and distance, also implies an implicit class bias. Bourdieu describes how “good, working class people” expect every image to perform a function (to thrill, to amuse, to be beautiful, etc.) whereas “intellectuals” are more concerned with representation than they are with the thing being represented, with form over function. This ability to distance oneself from the art object in order to appreciate it is rooted in the ability distance oneself from the “necessities of the natural and social world” (5). Bourdieu argues that the lower and working classes, who are presumably subjected to a life of relentless toil and mundane obligations, are not predisposed to view art objects with detachment since such a lifestyle requires a constant, active engagement with the material world. By contrast: “The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile—in a word, natural—enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane” (7). Thus, art and cultural consumption fulfill the social function of legitimating social differences: “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is exposed or

betrayed” (6). In addition to being arbitrary, designations of taste also work to legitimate social differences, to keep certain people, ideas, images and texts in “their place,” as it were.

Bordieu’s work has several implications for the films and cycles discussed in this dissertation. First, “bad” art objects are most frequently those texts whose pleasures are easily accessed and immediately apparent. The Dead End Kids cycle and its various offshoots seek to provide an immediate pleasure to the audience by replicating the images, plots and conventions of previous Dead End Kids films and generating a quick laugh or an easy scare. While to some extent all films seek to gratify the audience in some way (even those films which attempt to deny the audience certain filmic pleasures, like the films of Andy Warhol, nevertheless gratify those viewers who seek out precisely this kind of viewing experience), it is this desire which *defines* the Dead End Kids cycle. These films were only made because producers believed that replicating a previous formula would fill theater seats, that is, because they were pleasing their audiences. Likewise, the melodramatic cycle of the gangster film was marginalized in most critical histories of the genre because of its links with melodrama and that mode’s deliberate engagement with or manipulation of the viewer’s emotions, rather than the critical and emotional distance generated by more refined, more *masculine*, art objects. Melodrama has been viewed, historically, as a low culture phenomenon, belonging to the “masses” and to women and so its visceral satisfactions, which seek to pull in rather than to distance the viewer, were seen as somehow antithetical to the more high brow, tragic structure of the classic gangster cycle. Since viewers of tragedies know in advance that the hero will die or suffer, there are no surprising reversals or revelations, allowing a certain distance between viewer and narrative. In the melodramatic gangster film the possibility for redemption or death or both is always there, up

until the film's final or penultimate scene. As a result, audiences remain attached and riveted to the narrative, waiting to be carried from moment to moment.

Furthermore, by choosing to watch these films<sup>14</sup> audiences are often classified in some way: as low-brow, as uneducated, as exploited or as an Other. Fans of 1950s teenpics were, more often than not, the teenager, a generational Other whose tastes were unfamiliar, and therefore, ripe for exploitation, by producers, but also a source of concern for contemporary adults and moral entrepreneurs. Fans of the 1970s blaxploitation cycle were initially racial and economic Others (urban blacks) whose desires to see images of themselves onscreen were successfully exploited by clever entrepreneurs. And of course the ghetto action cycle was both a simple product aiming to capitalize on contemporary trends but also a cycle which (allegedly) attracted dangerous, gun- and knife-wielding Others into movie theaters. The cycle was also believed to have the potential to turn otherwise calm, nonviolent viewers into that dangerous entity, thus requiring heightened security measures and preemptory discussions of the film's controversial content in order to contain the threat of violence that lurked in the flickering images on screen. In the case of all five cycles examined in this dissertation, these various questions of taste are what ultimately contributed to their marginalization in film history or to the limited ways in which they have been documented and analyzed. When their pleasures are so simple and straight forward, what more can be said about them?

I want to make clear that the goal of this project is not to recuperate these film cycles as primary or as "important" objects of study within the field of film studies. I am not claiming that these films have unique artistic qualities (though some of them do) which previous

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<sup>14</sup> While I suspect that the target audiences for the Dead End Kids films were children and preteens who attended Saturday matinees, I have not yet been able to prove this hypothesis. In future drafts I hope to gain a better understanding of this cycle's primary audience.

scholars, have, in their intellectual snobbery, ignored, or were too ignorant to notice. Furthermore the majority of films included in this study hardly made the same cultural and artistic impact (in terms of cinematic influence or in the sheer number of viewers who have watched them) as such canonical favorites as *Casablanca* (1942, Michael Curtiz), *Citizen Kane* (1941, Orson Welles), or *À bout de souffle* (1960, Jean-Luc Godard), and I do not wish to claim that they do. My intention is not to legitimize these texts by invoking such official cultural criteria as thematic complexity or technical virtuosity; most of the films discussed (with the exception of a few like *Underworld*, *Dead End* [1937, William Wyler], *Rebel without a Cause* [1955, Nicholas Ray], *Superfly* [1972, Gordon Parks, Jr.], *Boyz N the Hood*, *Menace II Society*, etc.) contain unexceptional scripts and actors, and merely functional production values. Even if it were possible to claim some form of hidden artistic genius in B-films like *Spooks Run Wild* (1941, Phil Rosen) or *The Violent Years* (1956, William Morgan), I would be merely replicating the very notions of taste that such a project would seek to overturn. As Jeffrey Sconce has pointed out, scholars interested in recuperating or redeeming bad art objects (or what he calls “trash” or “paracinema”) by claiming that such distinctions are class-based, often end up reiterating the very class codes they criticized in the first place: “though they may attempt to disguise or renounce their cultural pedigree by aggrandizing such scandalous cultural artifacts, [these critics’] heritage in a ‘higher’ taste public necessarily informs their textual and critical engagement of even the most abject ‘low culture’ forms” (383).

By revisiting the sites of their release and reception, I wish to explain and understand not just how and why these films fell into the margins and the ideology and politics behind their outlaw status, but also to expand the way film studies documents and theorizes the history of cinema. In other words, I am suggesting that these films are significant not so much

because of what they are, but because of *why* they were made. Why did studios believe these films were a smart investment? Why did audiences go to see these films? Why did they stop getting made? What was their artistic and cultural impact? Any film or film cycle, no matter its budget or subject matter, has the potential to reveal a wealth of information about the studio that made it and the audience who went to see it. I believe that film cycles in general are poised to reveal much more about their sociohistorical contexts than a more polished mainstream release. Because the majority of these film cycles (namely those discussed in Chapters 2-4) were released quickly, with small budgets, they were better able to capitalize on the contemporary *zeitgeist* than films which took months or years to go from conception to theatrical release. Film cycles are films of the now. They are timely and by providing this service, cycles ensure themselves an eager audience, but rarely any prestige.

### **Issue # 3: Cycles Frequently Change Their Labels**

One final reason why film cycles receive little critical notice is because they are curious shape shifters, constantly changing their names, their definitions and their groupings. However, it is precisely these qualities that make film cycles an exciting and fruitful object of inquiry. This dissertation therefore will begin with the assumption that film genres and film cycles are protean, shifting entities with different, and sometimes competing, categorical hierarchies that change depending on the viewer and the viewer's goals or past experiences. For instance, categorizing the ghetto action film as a subgenre of the gangster film reveals its use of repeated (and therefore symbolic) icons, formulas and conventions, but indicates very little about the way in which these films were marketed and received. On the other hand, categorizing ghetto action films as youth films explains how they were marketed to a particular demographic but little about its use of

repeated visual elements (since youth films do not maintain a consistent iconography) (Speed 2). According to this view of genres and cycles, it is impossible to apply a fixed generic label to a film, since these categories are always in a constant state of flux and regeneration. If a genre appears stable at any point, it is an illusion which comes from examining one moment in time. For example, if we described *Underworld* in 1927, the year of its release, we would label it a “crime melodrama.” This label and our understanding of *Underworld* changes after the release and critical evaluation of the classic gangster cycle, which then places the film under various new headings like “silent,” “preclassical” and “gangster film,” three terms which did not exist in critical formulations when the film was released.

While I will be describing and theorizing the various categories under which the ghetto action cycle has been read and understood, I do not plan to conclude by proposing a “new and improved” label for these films. Rather, I hope to argue that each classification represents, to quote Altman, a specific “paradigm” for understanding the ghetto action film:

If we use a previous definition or delimitation of genre we are not, as we might think, reiterating a truth well known to all, a truth good for all ages, we are choosing a particular paradigm associated with that genre definition. Inasmuch as this activity is a *choice*, it deserves to be analyzed as fully as any other critical activity. (*American Film Musical* 9)

Each paradigm for understanding the ghetto action film—the gangster film, the Dead End Kids cycle, JD teenpics, blaxploitation and the 1990s black film boom—was created by different viewers for different purposes, and therefore reveals another, though limited, layer of meaning. By fixing on one paradigm, we constrain the possible meanings of the films, since, as Altman points out, genres are restrictive in that they provide us with a “pre-reading” of a text. If I see

ghetto action films solely as “gangsta films” then I will only pay attention to how they make use of or knowingly comment upon the icons, formulas and conventions of the gangster genre. Such a paradigm reveals a nuanced understanding of *Menace II Society* but tells me little about *Boyz N the Hood*. And while the paradigm of the JD teenpic provides history and meaning for the characters, settings and themes of *Boyz N the Hood*’s coming of age narrative, it excludes films like *New Jack City* and *Set it Off*, both of which focus on “adult” characters. Thus, this dissertation favors an approach to genre and film cycles which sees each layer of the “generic map” as equally important and constitutive of the genre’s or cycle’s total meaning. The revised model of genre study I am proposing will focus not just on the permanent, the locatable, and the characteristic, but also on the ephemeral, the dispersive, and the aberrant, in order to gain a richer understanding of the 1990s ghetto action films in particular, and of the nature of film cycles in general.

## **CHAPTER BREAKDOWN**

**Chapter 1, “The Gangster Film: What can border texts tell us about a genre’s past, present and future?”** argues in favor of the work of critics like Rick Altman and Tag Gallagher who have theorized that the concept of generic evolution, based on the fetishization of a genre’s classic stage, is an ahistorical structure which limits and marginalizes the multiplicity of texts and world events which have contributed to the formation and reception of a genre. I propose that genres are more accurately described as a series of cycles highlighting dominant concerns in both the genre and the larger culture, yielding an understanding of the social moment in which a film was forged. To illustrate this point I argue that the gangster film’s “border texts,” that is,

films which *do not* exemplify the criteria established by the genre's classic cycle—such as the “melodramatic” silent gangster film, *The Regeneration*—trouble traditional definitions of the genre (i.e., that gangster films are “hard” and “masculine”). This move reveals that the melodramatic conventions of these silent films are quite central to the genre, effectively shifting the configurations of the gangster film's corpus and modifying its generic “blueprint.” A cyclical approach to genres also activates more potential meanings within the genre as a whole, revealing more about the gangster film's various generic inheritors—including ghetto action films like *South Central*—than what is gleaned from a focus on its classic texts alone. By understanding the importance of the gangster genre's neglected cycles we can see where the ghetto action cycle originated, the historical significance of its icons and conventions, and how it belongs to a rich tradition of cinematic conventions arising out of a very specific public need.

**Chapter 2, “The Social Problem Film: Where do film cycles go when they die?”** analyzes the ghetto action film through the lens of the social problem film, specifically, the Dead End Kids cycle (1937-1939) and its B-film spin-offs, in order to theorize how cycles originate, flourish and change, and to understand how both cycles successfully exploited various real and media-generated concerns about the contemporary plight of urban youth. Using Janet Staiger's model of historical reception analysis, I show how the uniformity of the public discourses surrounding the Dead End Kids and ghetto action cycles—commenting on their realism, social importance and timeliness—preemptively defined each cycle's content. Reading the ghetto action cycle through the paradigm of the Dead End Kids cycle also highlights how and why certain images or tropes, no matter how far they stray from their original context, never disappear from popular culture, despite the common use of the word “death” in genre studies. Although both cycles initially aimed to illuminate a social problem, critics, audiences and

filmmakers were eventually exhausted by the films' inability to say anything new. But, as clichés, or free floating images unburdened of the weight of their original social content, these popular images could continue to circulate in a wide variety of formats. Thus the B-film spin offs of the Dead End Kids cycle found success by tapping into the national project of rallying the population behind the war effort in the early 1940s and converting the unrecuperable social problem of the late 1930s, the juvenile delinquent, into useful social products, namely soldiers and war supporters, (see *Let's Get Tough!* [1942, Wallace Fox]). Likewise, the bankability of direct to DVD spin offs (the B-films of today) of the ghetto action cycle are premised on the depiction of deviance, class and racial difference. This new cycle of films, labeled collectively in the industry as "urban," inserts the characters, images, settings and themes of the ghetto action cycle into more viable genres (see *Hood of the Living Dead* [2005, Ed and Jose Quiroz]).

**Chapter 3, "The Juvenile Delinquent Teenpic: How does the exploitation of youth subcultures help to create a film cycle (and vice versa)?"** analyzes the ghetto action cycle in terms of the 1950s juvenile delinquent themed teenpic, in order to understand the strange, multivalent, symbiotic relationship between youth subcultures and film cycles. Both cycles exploit contemporary, sensational, topics that snowballed into widespread moral panics, such as the newly emerging concepts of the "teenager," "juvenile delinquency," and rock n' roll in the mid-1950s, and concerns over black teenage "gang bangers," "the war on drugs," and gangsta rap in the early 1990s. In addition to determining what the lens of the 1950s JD teenpic reveals about the ghetto action cycle and what it conceals, this chapter analyzes teen-targeted magazines, studio advertising strategies and the media's reaction to contemporary teenagers and their musical tastes in order to understand how subcultural imagery was successfully exploited by mainstream culture. While many models of subcultural theory (most famously those

articulated in the 1970s by the British Birmingham school) argue that subcultures are intrinsically resistant to mainstream culture and that there is a definitive line between a subculture and its parent culture, in reality there is a constant exchange of elements between the two. Therefore I argue that mainstream culture was integral to the definition and formation of these two youth subcultures, working to expand and even contour their parameters. By comparing two film cycles created out of a desire to exploit the existence of two controversial youth subcultures, I hope to uncover the complex process by which film studios convert subcultural signifiers into film language and how that film language, in turn, helps to further shape subcultures.

**Chapter 4, “The Blaxploitation Film: What is the role of race in the creation of a film cycle?”** revisits the advertising strategies of the ghetto action and blaxploitation cycles to understand how and why blackness can become an exploitable product or hook. An analysis of the public discourses surrounding the marketing of both cycles, including movie trailers, posters, press kits and director and producer interviews, reveals that both marketing campaigns were predicated on the trope of “authentic blackness.” In the 1970s, studios marketed an image of blackness based upon the politics of black nationalism, while in the 1990s authenticity was embodied in the figure of the urban gangsta. For example, after the highly publicized outbreaks of theater violence at the screenings of *New Jack City* and *Boyz N the Hood*, the marketing campaign for *Juice* capitalized on the film’s potential to incite real life violence, even though the film text articulated a strong anti-violence message. The discourses surrounding the film consistently linked this violence with the film’s authenticity, and with its presumed ability to tell the truth about the real experiences of urban black youth. I therefore argue that these films engage in a kind of double speak in that the directors’ articulation of the purpose of their films

was often quite different from how studios chose to market it. This chapter further demonstrates how contemporary stereotypes and concerns over racial identity can be exploited to create a cycle and how, in turn, a cycle can serve to shape these stereotypes and concerns. Indeed, film cycles become a part of the public discourse on race relations and are so ingrained in the popular imagination that their images and themes can, in hindsight, stand in for reality.

Finally, in **Chapter 5, “Conclusion: Last Stop, the Music Video,”** which serves as an epilogue, I perform a detailed analysis of a music video, The Game’s “Hate it or Love it” (2004), arguing that the images and themes of the ghetto action cycle have become significant vehicles for communicating ghetto authenticity and nostalgia within the contemporary hip hop landscape. Hip hop, particularly gangsta rap, is and always has been tied to the concept of authenticity (a concept which changes its definitions over time). Nevertheless, today, with the widespread popularity and proliferation of studio-created, rather than “street created” rappers, there is an underlying fear in the industry that rap music, as one of the primary examples of contemporary black cultural achievement, will soon become as insignificant and disposable as any studio-generated pop record. Many contemporary rap tracks and their accompanying videos are therefore crafted to recreate an aura of “lost” authenticity. “Hate it or Love It” is a key text for the study of the ghetto action cycle since its primary function is to establish The Game’s authenticity in order to counter criticisms about his “inauthentic” approach to becoming a rapper, and because its project of authentication revolves around images and motifs culled from that very cycle. Although the ghetto action cycle was never truly authentic, in hindsight this period of black cultural production (approximately 1991-1996) is viewed as a pure moment in the evolution of gangsta rap and the “hard core” identity. Thus the themes, imagery, plots and overall sensibilities of the ghetto action cycle live on in the hip hop video, which I argue, is a

carefully crafted reflection of and mediation on the ways in which the contemporary gangsta identity is understood by both its target consumer market (youth) and the culture at large.

## **1.0 THE GANGSTER FILM: WHAT CAN BORDER TEXTS TELL US ABOUT A GENRE'S PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE?**

“The gangsta shocks the white audience because he is both the same and other to the classic gangster, evoking the violence that is at the heart of the affective structure of the American Dream and adding the immediate danger that is provoked in the white cultural imagination by the dangerous black body” (Gormley 100).

### **1.1 READING THROUGH THE PARADIGM OF CENTRAL TEXTS**

The ghetto action film, *Set it Off* (1996, F. Gary Gray), centers on a group of female friends/co-workers (they are night janitors), who collectively decide that the only solution to their current problems (including mounting bills, dead end jobs, inadequate child care options, wrongful job termination, etc.) is to rob banks. After completing several successful robberies, the women are increasingly nervous about getting arrested and decide that they need to plan “one final heist” before giving up crime for good. Their deliberations on this point become a self-conscious re-enactment of the meeting of the Five Families scene in *The Godfather* (1972, Francis Ford Coppola). The scene opens with a medium close up of Frankie (Vivica A. Fox), who slowly swivels around in her office chair to face the women. She has stuffed cotton balls into her cheeks (as Brando himself did) and affects her best Vito Corleone accent. As she lays her plan out to the

women, the camera pulls back to reveal a vast conference table (in an office they are supposed to be cleaning). Instead of paunchy, middle-aged Italian men, the camera reveals three, young African American women donning janitorial uniforms. Stoney (Jada Pinkett Smith) even has a plate of grapes placed before her, in a nod, perhaps, to the bowl of oranges which sits on the table when the families meet in *The Godfather*. While this moment is meant to be a comical interlude before the final, tragic chapter in this story, it also serves a key narrative purpose—to mend the rift that had been growing between the women and to establish the plan for their final, doomed robbery, much as the meeting of the Five Families offered a temporary truce before the eventual bloodbath that takes place at *The Godfather*'s conclusion.

After the robbery goes wrong and the women scatter in different directions to avoid the police, Cleo (Queen Latifah), the film's most unrepentant and hotheaded gangsta, finds herself trapped on all sides by the Los Angeles police department. To highlight Cleo's desperation the camera alternates from a claustrophobic close up on Cleo in the car to close ups of various members of the LAPD, whose rifles are cocked and aimed at her. Decisively, she lights up a cigarette, and begins to drive forward, towards the barricade. At this point, all sound disappears from the film; instead the images of gunfire ricocheting off of the vehicle, shouting policemen and squealing tires are replaced with a mournful ballad. When the car, now riddled with bullet holes, finally comes to a stop, we see the car door swing open. Perhaps getting her inspiration from all of the gangster movies she has watched (or the gangsta rap music she always blasts during the gang's various getaways), Cleo makes the decision to go out in a big way. She emerges, gun in hand, and begins to shoot, even as her body rocks back and forth in reaction to the bullets that hit her body. This scene is a quotation of the famous demise of the similarly hotheaded Sonny Corleone (James Caan) (a moment which in turn was an imitation of the

demise of of *Bonnie and Clyde*'s [1967, Arthur Penn] own hotheaded protagonists). In all three films what ultimately shocks the viewer is not the deaths of these characters—we know that such excessive individuals cannot survive to the end of a gangster film—but rather, the violence and brutality required to take them down. One or two bullets could have done the job, but instead these bodies are shot over and over, as if the extra gunfire will somehow exact a greater justice against those who have transgressed society and its laws. Paula Massood maintains that these self reflexive moments are a salient characteristic of the ghetto action film cycle (or what she calls “hood films”) “[T]hey focus, through quotation, allusion, and homage, on the plethora of images associated with African American urban youth culture in film, television and music video” (145).<sup>15</sup> These visual quotations also highlight the impact that the gangster genre has had on the ghetto action cycle. Much as Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) and his crew in *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) view films like *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas* (1990, Martin Scorsese) as a kind of guidebook for their chosen lifestyle, the characters of the ghetto action cycle likewise hail the gangster genre as an inspiration, both diegetically and non-diegetically. For example, in *New Jack City* (1991, Mario Van Peebles) Nino Brown (Wesley Snipes) watches *Scarface* (1984, Brian DePalma) while making love to his moll, in *Menace II Society* (1993, Allen and Albert Hughes) Caine (Tyin Turner) watches *He Walked by Night* (1948, Alfred L. Werker) in the hospital as he recovers from a gunshot wound and in *Juice* (1992, Ernest R. Dickerson) Bishop (Tupac Shakur) watches and then enthusiastically reenacts the fiery climax of *White Heat* (1949, Raoul Walsh) as his perplexed friends look on.

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<sup>15</sup> It can be argued, as Jim Collins does, that all genre films produced from the 1980s onwards are, in some ways, self reflexive because of the range of technological developments taking place over the last twenty-five years including home video players, the internet and now, Tivo: “The ‘recyclability’ of texts from the past, the fact that once-forgotten popular texts can now be ‘accessed’ almost at will changes the cultural function of genre films past and present” (246).

However, this conscious recycling of the gangster film's familiar generic elements is just one reason for why the ghetto action film has been consistently understood as a modern example of the gangster film.<sup>16</sup> The ghetto action film and the gangster film also share a common semantic pool (marginalized or criminalized heroes, urban landscapes, etc.) and a related syntax or thematics (retribution for transgressing social boundaries). The first part of this chapter will demarcate what the paradigm of the gangster film reveals and what it obscures about the ghetto action cycle, its imagery and its thematics, in order to understand why this cycle is often described as a contemporary, "urban" derivative of the larger gangster genre, as the "gangsta" cycle. Since I cannot offer a detailed discussion of the entire corpus of the gangster genre, for the purposes of this comparison I will be limiting my understanding of the gangster genre to a discussion of its so-called "classic cycle" of *Scarface* (1932, Howard Hawks), *Little Caesar* (1930, Mervyn LeRoy), and *The Public Enemy* (1931, William Wellman), since these films are generally understood to be the most representative of the genre. After establishing what the paradigm of the classic gangster film discloses and what it conceals in the ghetto action cycle, the second goal of this chapter is to move beyond the conventional understanding of the gangster genre (and its generic descendants, like the ghetto action cycle) derived from the study of its most "central texts," (aka, the aforementioned "classic cycle"). While the icons, formulas and conventions found in these films are certainly integral to an understanding of the gangster film, the fetishization of the classic cycle, common to many genre studies, is a practice which

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<sup>16</sup> See Fran Mason's *The American Gangster Film: From Little Caesar to Pulp Fiction* (2002), Jonathan Munby's *Public Enemies, Private Heroes* (1999), Jodi Brooks' "'Worrying the Note': Mapping Time in the Gangsta Film" (2001), Douglas Brode's *Men, Women and Guns: Crime Movies from Bonnie and Clyde to the Present* (1995), Manthia Diawara's "Black American Cinema: The New Realism" (1993), Beretta E. Smith-Shomade's "'Rock-a-Bye, Baby!': Black Women Disrupting Gangs and Constructing Hip-Hop Gangsta Films" (2003), Mark Winokur's "Marginal Marginalia: The African-American Voice in the Nouvelle Gangster Film" (1995), S. Craig Watkins' *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (1998), Todd Boyd's *Am I Black Enough For You?: Popular Culture from the Hood and Beyond* (1997), Marilyn Yaquinto's *Pump 'Em Full of Lead: A Look at Gangsters on Film* (1998), etc.

serves to close down the genre's potential meanings. Much as the paradigm of the gangster film rearranges the corpus of the ghetto action film, making some texts central (*Set it Off*, *New Jack City*) and others marginal (*Boyz N the Hood* [1991, John Singleton], *Straight Out of Brooklyn* [1991, Matty Rich]), the privileging of the gangster film's classic cycle serves to ghettoize some its films (*Underworld* [1927, Josef von Sternberg]) and to privilege others (*The Godfather*). After all, the gangster genre has existed for almost one hundred years and has a corpus encompassing hundreds and hundreds of films—how is it that just three texts can define such an enormous corpus?

According to Henri Focillon, a work of art that has reached its classic stage is defined by “stability, security, following upon experimental unrest” (11). While establishing and privileging a genre's classic stage is appealing because it provides stable definitions and critical tidiness for an unwieldy body of heterogeneous texts, it also acts as an ahistorical, totalizing structure which limits and marginalizes the multiplicity of texts, both within and outside the world of film, which have contributed to the formation and reception of the genre. The classic stage, the point at which a genre and its meanings have presumably saturated the audience, when its semantics and syntax are at their most identifiable and when the genre in question is in its most transparent form (Schatz 38), fixes and stabilizes an organism which is by nature mobile and mercurial. However, examining the significance of a genre's “border texts,”<sup>17</sup> or those texts which do not occupy a central place in a genre's corpus and which do not wholly live up to the genre's most central criteria, activates more potential meanings within the genre, meanings

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<sup>17</sup> I borrow the idea of the border text from Rick Altman's discussion of the relationship between generic formation and nation building in *Film/Genre*: “All genre formation, I have suggested, begins with a process of cycle-making creolization, combining gypsy adjectives with established, land-owning generic substantives. Only when those previously marginalized adjectives plant their flag in the centre of the world are they transmuted into substantial genres, thus putting them on the map, as it were, while simultaneously opening them up to new adjectival settlements and an eventual squatter take over” (199).

which are normally discounted, marginalized or glossed over because they do not fit within the genre's central parameters. Hence, while the classic stage is always a useful location to begin an analysis of a long-established genre, like the gangster film or Western, a genre study must move beyond the themes and images established by the classic stage if it is to account for a genre's rich and complicated history.

When critics privilege a genre's classic stage they are also promoting the idea of generic evolution. This model attempts to describe how art forms grow and change over time and assumes that a cultural form has a defined moment of perfection, placing the forms which came before and after the classic stage into a particular evolutionary moment or stage. According to Focillon, the classic form "has been created out of one final, ultimate experiment, the audacity and vitality of which it has never lost" and represents a "brief, perfectly balanced instant of complete possession of forms" (12). In the case of film studies, texts preceding the classic stage are considered undeveloped examples of the genre, while texts following the classic stage are supposed to be more self reflexive, stylized and parodic. Although this model of evolutionary change is neat, easy to follow, and occasionally, quite accurate, critics like Tag Gallagher and Rick Altman have suggested that it is also inadequate for understanding how genres and their meanings grow, change and proliferate in and through time. Most problematically, as Rick Altman has argued, this model discounts the historicity of genre formations ( *Film/Genre* 22). Abandoning the model of generic evolution in genre studies allows history, which is so often neglected, to come to the fore.

When we abandon the concept of a classic cycle, based on a linear, synchronic, evolutionary model, and admit that it is but one moment of prominence in the genre, rather than the unchanging blueprint against which all other texts within a particular genre must be gauged,

we are able to acknowledge the significance of *all* texts which contribute to the vast pool of generic elements composing a genre, not just the commercially or critically successful ones. This chapter will demonstrate how reading the gangster film through a cycle of marginalized border texts—such as the “preclassical” melodramatic gangster films of the teens and twenties—illuminates significant themes and historical links which remain unacknowledged in conventional studies of the gangster genre. This analysis will also shine some light on the previously dark corners of the genre’s history. This chapter will then conclude by reading the ghetto action film through the new paradigm created through the consideration of these border texts, such as *The Regeneration* (1915, Raoul Walsh) and *Underworld*. This new reading will explain why certain key ghetto action films dealing with melodramatic themes of redemption and regeneration, such as *Boyz N the Hood* and *South Central* (1992, Steve Anderson), maintain strong links with the gangster film, despite their seeming distance from the classic gangster film’s central semantics and syntax.

### **1.1.1 Tracing the Gangsta to the Gangster**

When critics label the ghetto action film a “gangsta film” they are not just pointing to the cycle’s similarities with the gangster genre. The word “gangsta” also references the influence of gangsta rap and its associated thematics, imagery and worldview on the ghetto action cycle, as well as the gangsta persona’s indebtedness to the screen gangster. Consequently, this study must begin with an examination of the gangsta persona found in rap music, and the links between this character and that of the gangster hero. Throughout this discussion it is important to keep in mind that the gangsta, as he appears within the narratives of gangsta rap, is not a “real person” but rather a persona or character crafted by the musician/rapper, much as Sonny Corleone was a character

created by Mario Puzo. Furthermore, while some gangsta rappers (Ice T, Notorious B.I.G., The Game, etc.) *were* hustlers (i.e., individuals who make their livings through illegal means) prior to the launch of their rap careers, the personas they create in their music are *not* pure autobiography (through these readings are often encouraged in the media).<sup>18</sup> The stories s/he tells are often exaggerated or invented “boasts,” and thus, argues Robin D.G. Kelley, should be understood in the context of a larger set of signifying practices dating back to the “baadman” tales of the late 1800s as well as the often violent, sexualized folksongs of musicians like Jelly Roll Morton in the 1940s. Kelley explains that these narratives create a “Carnival” type atmosphere in which traditional authority is challenged and the oppressed are made powerful (*Race Rebels* 187).

Gangsta rap acquired its name because the personas adopted by groups like N.W.A. and later, solo artists like Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G.,<sup>19</sup> are similar to that of the screen gangster. Indeed, the figure of the gangster, as an individual who circumvents the traditional means of social advancement via the shortcut of crime, is one that transcends race and ethnicity. Davarian Baldwin explains: “Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Americans of all hues who have been marginalized as ethnic or ‘other’ have utilized the ‘gangsta’ as a site of socio-economic mobility” (161). Both the gangster and the gangsta are acutely aware of the gap between the ideal of the American Dream (characterized by wealth, prestige and happiness) and the reality in which they live (marked by hardship, poverty and anonymity). Both the gangster and the gangsta are denied access to this American Dream because of economic and social disenfranchisement; the classic film gangster’s criminality is rooted in his origins in the extreme

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<sup>18</sup> For a detailed discussion of how rappers use their criminal past to authenticate their rap persona, see Chapter 5.

<sup>19</sup> The purpose of this chapter is to show how the gangsta persona was popularized and therefore able to filter into mainstream film. As a result, my primary examples of gangsta rap will come from mainstream acts like N.W.A. and Ice Cube, Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. because they are some of the most commercially successful “cross over” examples of early 1990s gangsta rappers.

poverty found in the immigrant-populated tenements of turn-of-the-century American cities, while the gangsta's criminality stems from the economic devastation of certain neighborhoods of post-industrial Los Angeles, a process of ghettoization which began in the late 1960s. Given their social and economic marginalization, the gangster and the gangsta must operate outside of society, in the alternative, yet lucrative economy of the criminal world, in order to achieve the justice, security and wealth that the American Dream promises to but does not always deliver those who work hard and persevere.

The most practical place to begin a discussion of the gangsta persona found in rap music is 1989,<sup>20</sup> when the West Coast-based group, N.W.A. (Niggas With Attitude), released the first commercially successful gangsta rap album, *Straight Outta Compton*, thus initiating a style of rap which would dominate the genre for over a decade (and which has recently witnessed a resurgence in contemporary artists like 50 Cent and The Game). With songs like "Fuck Tha Police" and "Dopeman," N.W.A. helped to establish the salient characteristics of the new subgenre of gangsta rap, namely the use of angry, antiestablishment lyrics detailing the crime, violence and desperation of life in the primarily black, working class neighborhoods of east Oakland and south central Los Angeles, including Watts, Compton, Northwest Pasadena, Carson and North Long Beach. Mark Neal sums up the conflation of socioeconomic factors that contributed to the rampant criminalization of Los Angeles throughout the 1980s in this way:<sup>21</sup>

The postindustrial transformation of Los Angeles, including the emergence of Japanese imports, effectively mitigated many of the economic and social gains

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<sup>20</sup> While 1989 is the year most commonly cited as the moment when gangsta rap became a widely known subgenre of rap, Robin D.G. Kelley claims that "gangsta lyrics and style" were present from the moment of hip hop's origins in the South Bronx in the mid-1970s (186). Kelley cites more developed sources of gangsta rap as early as 1987 in East Coast acts like Philadelphia's Schooly D, the Bronx's KRS-1 and Scott La Rock (*Race Rebels* 87).

<sup>21</sup> See also Robin D.D. Kelley's *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* for a discussion of the socioeconomic factors influencing gangsta rap.

made by the black working class in the post-World War II era. Furthermore, many African-Americans, particularly young black men, were excluded both from service and the high-tech industries that were developing in the region, leading to unemployment rates well over 40 percent among black youth. The significant demand for crack cocaine and the relative ease with which it could be produced on-site made the crack cocaine trade an attractive alternative to the abject poverty that defined the postindustrial experience for many blacks. (Neal 369)

These crime-infested neighborhoods serve as the primary inspiration for gangsta rap. The “I” of the gangsta’s narrative is used “to signify both personal and collective experiences” (Kelley *Race Rebels* 194) and so gangsta rap presented an opportunity for West Coast city dwellers to tell their side of the story, which was otherwise only conveyed through “outside” voices (Watkins *Genre* 240), such as the front pages of America’s newspapers, nightly television news broadcasts, television programs like Bill Moyers’ documentary “The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America,”<sup>22</sup> and in social science journals<sup>23</sup> (Lott “Marooned” 78-79). Rap music has thus been characterized as the “voice of black urban poor people” (Lott “Marooned” 79), for the marginalized Los Angeles residents who are denied a public forum in which to articulate their frustrations with the social system.

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22 In 1986 CBS aired “The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America,” a study of “black urban welfare culture” in Newark, New Jersey. The documentary, though it never explicitly mentions the Moynihan Report, is essentially an updating of those arguments first posed in 1965. The documentary argues that welfare might be perpetuating poverty and rootlessness, rather than aiding it (Corry). The show was lauded by publications both liberal (*The New York Times*) and conservative (*National Review*), and by liberal pundits like Jesse Jackson and William Raspberry (Corry, Novak, “Reaganite”).

<sup>23</sup> Tommy Lott found that “A recent survey of popular new journals appearing over the past ten years or so revealed that between 1977 and 1988 the prevailing definitions of the underclass moved from a general reference to poverty that included whites to an exclusive emphasis on the behavioral, cultural and moral characteristics of black urban poor people” (“Marooned” 79).

After almost a decade under the Reagan administration,<sup>24</sup> which fostered and exploited mainstream, white fears of the non-white inner city, the state of economic and social devastation in the ghetto and stereotypes of “welfare queens” and gang bangers, the late 1980s marks a moment when the faces in the newspaper finally had the chance to talk back to mainstream America. For example, gangsta rap lyrics often focus on recreating for the listener the experience of living in the inner cities of Los Angeles: “In the music and lyrics, the city is an audible presence, explicitly cited and digitally sampled in the reproduction of the aural textures of the urban environment” (Forman 203). One of the most poignant descriptions of inner city life occurs in Ice Cube’s single “It Was a Good Day,” a number one “cross-over” radio hit in 1992: “I can’t believe, today was a good day/ Drove to the pad and hit the showers/ Didn’t even get no static from the cowards/ ‘Cause just yesterday them fools tried to blast me/ Saw the police and they rolled right past me/ No flexin’, didn’t even look in a niggaz direction .../Today I didn’t even have to use my A.K./ I got to say it was a good day.” Here, the gangsta acts as a “street ethnographer” (Kelley 190), articulating anxieties that had previously remained concealed. He describes the daily ordeals of the ghetto: police harassment, gang tensions, and paranoid necessity of always carrying a weapon, etc. Avoiding jail and death are, for the gangsta, the hallmarks of a good day.

Like the gangsta, the classic gangster hero was a contemporary figure, reflecting the problems arising from living a working class, urban existence. Jonathan Munby points out that unlike other mythical American heroes, like the cowboy, “the gangster never allows an escape from the problems of here and now. He is not so much about the past or an alternative

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24 When referencing the policies associated with past Presidents like Ronald Reagan, George Herbert Walker Bush and Bill Clinton, I will use the terms “Reagan administration,” “Bush administration” and “Clinton administration” in order to separate the idea of these individual men from the strategies enacted by their respective political parties at specific historical moments.

landscape as he is about the inescapable truths of the urban present” (2). During the height of the gangster film’s popularity in the early 1930s, for example, the figure of the gangster spoke to the discontent of the immigrant and working classes, who toiled long hours at thankless jobs in the burgeoning ghettos of America’s cities. For these individuals, who felt that the dream they were pursuing was wholly incompatible with the reality they endured each day, the gangster truly was a hero. Eugene Rosow even describes the 1930s gangster as a pseudo-Robin Hood<sup>25</sup> figure, putting a dent in the coffers of the rich and demanding a “more equitable distribution of wealth” (163-166). It is likely, as many critics have argued,<sup>26</sup> that a disheartened American audience enjoyed watching gangsters breaking the rules and succeeding in the process, particularly during the Great Depression, when the discrepancy between the ideal of the American Dream and its brutal reality was even further accentuated.

The opposition between individual and society, articulated so strongly in both the gangster film and gangsta rap, forms the basis of Robert Warshow’s central argument in “The Gangster as Tragic Hero” (1948), a brief essay which has nevertheless served as a touchstone for all critics of the genre since its publication over fifty years ago (Neale *Genre and Hollywood* 76). Warshow attributes the appeal of the gangster film to the discourses of success and happiness that compose the fabric of the American imagination. He explains that America “is committed to a cheerful view of life” (97), an obligation which entails starting a family, going to work and obeying the law. We should be cheerful, this theory affirms, because in America, everyone has a chance to become “somebody.” However, experience also tells us that going to work and obeying the law does not necessarily ensure success, let alone happiness. The very concept of the

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<sup>25</sup> Real life racketeers tried to cultivate just such an image for themselves. During the Great Depression, Al Capone famously financed soup kitchens across Chicago (Rosow 166).

<sup>26</sup> See Clarens, McCarty, Munby, Rosow, etc.

American Dream, of having power and fortune, entails that someone else *not* have it. To be at the top implies that someone else, many people in fact, must be at the bottom. The gangster and the gangsta's disenchantment with the "opportunities" (usually mind numbing wage labor) offered to them by America is therefore a strong critique of America's central tenet that *anyone* can achieve the American Dream. Warshow continues "If an American or a Russian is unhappy, it implies a certain reprobation of his society, and therefore...it becomes an obligation of the citizen to be cheerful" (97). In other words, an antisocial reaction to the long revered American values of hard work, sacrifice, obedience to authority and deferred gratification, is, according to Warshow, central to the gangster's appeal because: "In ways that we do not easily or willingly define, the gangster speaks for us, expressing that part of the American psyche which rejects the qualities and the demands of modern life, which rejects 'Americanism' itself" (100).

Another key similarity between these two personas—the film gangster and the figure of the gangsta—is not just that they are criminals; what links them together is their doubled understanding that they are both excluded from America's meritocracy system (hard work will be rewarded) and yet deserve to succeed as much as anyone else. George Jackson, the co-producer of *New Jack City*, claimed that his inspiration for the film arose from the parallels he saw between "the Roaring Twenties and the Roaring Eighties...particularly in the emergence of the new American gangster" (qtd. in Yaquinto 190). In *Scarface* (1984, Brian DePalma) for example, Tony Montana (Al Pacino) arrives in Miami as a poor "political refugee"<sup>27</sup> from Cuba, with no skills, no education and an understanding of American culture derived primarily from watching classic gangster films on TV. Yet, he firmly believes he is entitled to an instantaneous

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<sup>27</sup> Tony Montana is a "Marielito," one of 125,000 Cubans Fidel Castro "released" to the United States in 1980. It was discovered however, that included among these refugees were almost 25,000 criminals. In the press and in U.S. discussions with Cuba, the Marielitos thus became known as "excludables," a title referring to "criminals and mentally ill persons deemed ineligible to remain in the United States" (Skoug 57).

life of wealth and comfort. Therefore, when faced with a dead end dishwashing job that forces him to gaze upon the opulent lifestyles of the criminals who frequent the club across the street, it is not difficult to understand why Tony agrees to work for a cocaine dealer instead. He explains to his companion: “Fucking onions. I ought to be picking gold from the street.” Similarly, the gangsta ruminates upon the dilemma of being caught between the drudgery of low-paying dead end jobs and the excitement and financial reward of a life in crime, particularly, drug dealing. As Eric Watts explains “In a moving way... gangsta rap articulates an important perspective on the sad stasis of discharged personhood—the cultivated refusal by a cannibalistic consumer society to own up to its inability to meet its fabulous promises for livelihood” (Watts “An Exploration” 605). Thus like the film gangster, the gangsta persona “provides conflicted and contradictory testimony for the American Dream” (605). Rather than choose a nine-to-five job, the gangsta prefers to steal what he needs. For example, in “You’re Nobody (Til Somebody Kills You)” (1997), Notorious B.I.G. explains that he is not interested in the myth of the American, middle class work ethic (as well as its moral code), which demands long hours, sacrifice, deferred gratification, and taking orders from superiors in order to achieve financial and social success (i.e., the American Dream): “As I leave my competition, with sporated style/Climb the ladder to success, escalator style.”

The gangsta, like the gangster, has limited options for social mobility within society and so he must develop his own economy outside of mainstream society. In the rap narrative, recurrent themes are based on the gangsta’s experiences with an underground economy of drug dealing, gambling, pimping and killing. Of course, these stories are nevertheless to be understood primarily as “metaphors” of resistance against the State, which polices the gangsta whether he is in jail or at home in his ‘hood.” In gangsta rap, these “Negative stereotypes of

black men as violent, pathological, and lazy are recontextualized: criminal acts are turned into brilliant capers and a way to *avoid* work; white fears of black male violence become evidence of black power; fearlessness is treated as a measure of masculinity” (Kelley *Race Rebels* 213). Similarly, in the gangster narrative, working a nine-to-five job is equated with a kind of living death. As Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) explains in *Goodfellas*: “For us to live any other way was nuts. To us, those goody-goody people who worked shitty jobs for bum paychecks and took the subway to work every day, and worried about their bills, were dead. I mean they were suckers. They had no balls. If we wanted something we just took it.” The gangsta and the gangster live out the listener’s/audience’s generalized fantasies of rejecting compliance and authority. The gangster “speaks for us,” Warshaw tells us, in that he “is what we want to be and what we are afraid we may become” (101). Both figures take traits we normally label as antisocial or even pathological, and turns their meanings on their head, making them acceptable (at least within the context of the film or song narrative).

For example, moments after robbing and killing a gas station attendant in the opening of *Little Caesar*, Rico Bandello (Edward G. Robinson), describes the character traits needed to rise in the criminal underworld to his timid companion, Joe Massara (Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.) “Why, what’s there to be afraid of? And when I get in a tight spot, I shoot my way out of it. Why sure. Shoot first and argue afterwards. You know, this game ain’t for guys that’s soft!” And in Notorious B.I.G.’s “Ready to Die” (1994), the gangsta points out that his only route to financial security is through violence: “My mother didn’t give me what I want, what the fuck?/Now I got a glock, makin’ motherfuckers duck/Shit is real, and hungry’s how I feel/I rob and steal because that money got that whip appeal.” These lyrics transition from a sense of outrage over a childhood of poverty to an assertion of new-found power, granted through the

acquisition of a gun. Both Rico Bandello and Notorious B.I.G.'s rap persona justify their antisocial violence as economic necessity. It is also significant that both characters here cite a gun—and their willingness to use it—as integral to their ability to obtain what they desire from the modern city. While both Rico and Notorious B.I.G. indicate that their violence is motivated by money, the *power* that a firearm affords them is also central to the appeal of the gangster lifestyle. Rico tells Joe “Yeah, money’s all right, but it ain’t everything. Yeah, I’ll be somebody. Look hard at a bunch of guys and know that they’ll do anything you tell ‘em. Have your own way or nothin’. Be somebody.”

The gangster and the gangsta likewise gain immense pleasure from flaunting the rules of social decorum and reveling in violent acts, a pleasure which they share with the audience. Some gangsta rap songs (like the aforementioned “Ready to Die”) reference social inequalities as a motivation for criminal activities. In fact, Tommy Lott argues that descriptions of criminal acts are often an expression of social resistance in rap music: “The crime metaphor in rap culture serves notice on mass media’s ideological victimization of black men...Their purpose is to invalidate, on a constant basis, the images of black men in mass media with various recoding techniques that convey other meanings to their largely black audience” (“Marooned” 80). However, other songs celebrate antisocial behavior for its own sake. N.W.A.’s “Gangsta Gangsta” (1988) opens: “Here’s a little somethin’ bout a nigga like me/ never shoulda been let out the penitentiary./ Ice Cube would like ta say/ That I’m a crazy mutha fucka from around the way. /Since I was a youth I smoked weed out,/ Now I’m the mutha fucka that ya read about./ Takin’ a life or two, that’s what the hell I do, /you don’t like how I’m livin, well fuck you!” These lyrics reference not only illegal and antisocial activities (smoking marijuana and committing murder, respectively), but also exploit mainstream, white America’s own fears about

the primarily black inner city community. Ice Cube claims he is an ex-convict who was let out of jail before he was “reformed” and that he is precisely the urban menace that white America was reading about on the front pages of early 1990s newspapers. Ice Cube revels in the knowledge that certain touchstones—prison, drugs, rampant nihilism—will trigger negative reactions from mainstream America, and therefore dresses himself in these images.

Screen gangsters of the 1930s carry themselves with similar, antisocial bravado. Perhaps the most iconic example of the gangster’s defiance occurs in *The Public Enemy* when the protagonist, Tommy Powers (James Cagney), becomes frustrated when his moll, Kitty (Mae Clark), questions his request for a beer with his breakfast. When verbal threats do not keep Kitty quiet, Tom slams his grapefruit into her face. Despite the outrageousness<sup>28</sup> of this act Carlos Clarens argues that this shocking moment is precisely what drew audiences to the film (61). And one of the audience’s first encounters with Tony Camonte occurs when we see him strike a match on the badge of Detective Guarino in order to light his cigarette. We see this act in a close up, precisely to allow the audience to revel in Camonte’s brash, antisocial act. True, Guarino knocks him out with a well-aimed punch immediately afterwards, but Tony (and the audience), know it was worth it.

In addition to their antiestablishment behaviors the gangsta and the gangster are attractive figures because there is a part of the audience that also fears and despises them, and therefore celebrates their eventual demise (either through death or incarceration). As Warshow argues “we gain the double satisfaction of participating vicariously in the gangster’s sadism and then seeing it turned against the gangster himself” (101-102). In the gangster film, this two-pronged reaction is closely tied to the contradictions inherent in American capitalism. The free

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<sup>28</sup> In a 1931 review of the film Bosley Crowther described this scene as “one of the cruelest and most startling acts ever committed on film” (qtd. in Clarens 61).

market economy of American society tells us that if we want to succeed, we must eliminate our competition, and yet that same society tells us that eliminating the competition has moral consequences (Shadoian 5). The gangster figure, Thomas Schatz explains, effectively reflects these competing interpretations of the American Dream: “This internal conflict—between individual accomplishment and the common good, between man’s self-serving and communal instincts, between his savagery and his rational morality—is mirrored in society, but the opposing impulses have reached a delicate and viable balance within the modern city” (85). Richard Maltby adds that in the 1930s “The gangster pictures contributed to [the] scapegoating of an ethnic stereotype of criminality,” making the gangster “an embodiment of guilt to be expiated” (“Spectacle” 141).

Therefore, it is not surprising that the classic gangster film revels in the prolonged, painful death of its ethnic protagonist: Tony Camonte (Paul Muni) is gunned down by multiple policemen when he “turns yellow” (just as Guarino predicted) and makes a run for it in *Scarface*, Tommy Powers topples over the threshold of his childhood home, swaddled in hospital blankets, in *The Public Enemy* and Rico Bandello is shot down like a dog, hiding in dark back alley, at the conclusion of *Little Caesar*. The camera lingers on Rico’s face, with his twisted mouth and hollowed eyes, as if to say “He got what he deserved.”<sup>29</sup> After the demise of the Production Code and the establishment of the CARA ratings system in 1968,<sup>30</sup> filmmakers were free to develop bloodier, more fantastically unusual ways to kill off their gangsters: the slow motion, “ballet of blood” at the conclusion of *Bonnie and Clyde*, castration in *Foxy Brown* (1974,

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<sup>29</sup> The film opens with a Biblical quote that contains a similar sentiment: “...for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword. Matthew: 26-52”

<sup>30</sup> In fact, in his study of the Production Code Administration’s censorship of violence during the studio system, *Classical Film Violence*, Stephen Prince argues that “Violence, in our contemporary sense of the term, does not exist in Hollywood cinema before the late 1960s” (30). Rather, it is only in the 1960s, with the “amplification of style,” that we begin to think of violent depictions as “violent.”

Samuel Z. Arkoff), various forms of strangulation in *The Godfather*, and, more recently, sodomy was used to kill off a homosexual capo, Vito Spatafore (Joseph Gannascoli), in *The Sopranos*. Some critics, like Stephen Prince, have argued that there is no way to depict cinematic violence without inducing pleasure in the viewer. Unlike real life violence, which dampens or even inhibits aggressive responses because it is so disturbing to encounter, screen violence is “pain free” (“Graphic Violence” 24-27). It is both vivid and highly stylized. Thus we enjoy the gangster’s come uppance, and the bloodier, the better. But why must gangster films always conclude with a bloody death? Why must his death be spectacular in order to be satisfying?

To answer this question we need to first understand that every enduring American film genre is structured around a binary opposition reflecting an irresolvable contradiction entrenched within the American psyche. Each new entry in the genre represents another attempt to negotiate and resolve the particular cultural conflict generated by these opposing forces. Thus, a particular genre’s longevity is often a sign that its conflict is of fundamental social interest, that both sides are appealing. While we demand, on the one hand, the establishment of law and order in order to build a stable society, we also chafe against these restrictions and the hypocrisy of a social system that appears to dole out rewards and punishments in an arbitrary fashion (i.e., the difference in the way white collar and blue collar criminals are penalized). In *Hollywood Genres* (1981) Thomas Schatz explains that:

In addressing basic cultural conflicts and celebrating the values and attitudes whereby these conflicts might be resolved, all film genres represent the filmmakers’ and audience’s cooperative efforts to ‘tame’ those beasts...which threaten the stability of our everyday lives...the genre film celebrates our collective sensibilities, providing an array of ideological strategies for negotiating

social conflicts. The conflicts themselves are significant (and dramatic) enough to ensure our repeated attendance. (29)

The irresolvable opposition between the individual and society is “resolved” in the same way in the majority of gangster films — the individual who has disrupted society must be eliminated in a spectacular and/or cathartic fashion. It has been argued that such moments of excessive visual display work to distract viewers from acknowledging that the film’s “solution” to the conflict between the individual and society is an unsatisfactory one (Schatz 32).

Furthermore, the bloody resolution of the gangster film serves an ideological function, acting as a warning to the audience that transgressing the moral and social order will inevitably be punished. As Robert Warshaw first noted, there is inexorability about the gangster’s death; he is, in fact, a “tragic hero.”<sup>31</sup> After all, if the gangster was allowed to remain unpunished at the film’s conclusion, then society might begin to question the appeal of obeying the current social order. His death is a simple solution to a complex issue requiring a critical examination of the social, economic and political structures of American society. It is because of this ability to address deep seated social conflicts and then resolve them in simplistic and reactionary ways that film genres are thought by many critics to be structures through which dominant ideology flows. Judith Hess Wright, for example, believes that American genre films, namely the western, the science fiction film, the horror film and the gangster film, help to reinforce the status quo by “produc[ing] satisfaction rather than action, pity and fear rather than revolt” (41). The gangster film assists in “the maintenance of the status quo” through its insistence that the individual not strive beyond his/her set place in society, or that the individual

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<sup>31</sup> The convention of the gangster’s death at the film’s climax was also instituted from outside of the text, by the strictures of the Production Code Administration. The rule in question stated that criminals cannot go unpunished. The “classic cycle” came of age before such “do’s and don’ts” were strictly enforced, however, it was partly because of these films that the film industry decided to put some “teeth” into the enforcement of the Production Code.

assimilate by leaving his/his environment and subscribing to a dominant, white, middle class belief system (Wright 41). Therefore, one of the pleasures of the gangster film is that it gives voice to a critique of the American Dream while keeping that critique safely contained within the moral boundaries of the film.

The appeal of the gangsta is similar to that of the film gangster, however, the narratives of gangsta rap rarely end in the death of the rapper. The reasons for this are clear: the rapper reuses the same persona<sup>32</sup> in song after song, and so to narrativize his or her own death would require the rapper to invent a new persona for each song. This is not to say that the subject of death is not discussed in rap songs; rappers like Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. often speculated on the nature of their own deaths in songs like “How Long Will They Mourn Me” (1994) and “Ready to Die.” In the former, Shakur expresses the nihilism of life in the ghetto and contemplates how the world will regard him once he is dead: “It’s kinda hard to be optimistic /When your homie’s lying dead on the pavement twisted...They should’ve shot me when I was born/Now I’m trapped in the muthafuckin’ storm/How long will they mourn me?” For the gangsta, life in the ghetto is often likened to a prison or to an endless, paranoid scramble to stay alive. An early death, in addition to being expected, is often greeted with a measure of relief. Thus there is an overt self consciousness in the world of the gangsta rap narrative—that even when a gangsta is at the top of his game, he could lose it at any moment.

The gangsta will often detail his past life of poverty, before he became a rap star, which stands in sharp contrast to his new life of fame and luxury. But as in the gangster film, the rap gangsta’s rise is connoted via certain key icons of success, particularly cars, jewelry and

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<sup>32</sup> Of course, some rappers have multiple personas which are used in different songs. For example, rapper Eminem raps as Marshall Mathers (the rapper’s given name, the “person” behind the persona), Slim Shady (his dark, violent alter ego) and Eminem (his rap persona).

indulgence in champagne, drugs and women: “When I was dead broke, man I couldn’t picture this/50 inch screen, money green leather sofa/ Got two rises, a limousine with a chauffeur...And my whole crew is loungin’/ Celebratin’ every day, no more public housin’.” In these verses, from Notorious B.I.G.’s hit crossover single, “Juicy” (1994), the narrative moves back and forth between past and present conditions, between the extremes of ghetto poverty and ostentatious wealth. Such a narrative structure is perhaps a nod to the ephemerality of success in the music industry where artists can move from the top of the charts to virtual obscurity if they are unable to manufacture more hits. Likewise, life as a gangsta, as a hustler on the streets, is characterized by random violence and death. It is not surprising then, that both Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G., after penning numerous songs about the inevitability of an untimely death, were gunned down (in, some say, linked shootings) at the height of their careers. Furthermore, the street hustler’s economic gains do not allow him to establish himself socially for any length of time; “unlike other ethnic groups who used the drug trade as a foundation to build upon ‘legitimate wealth’—Mario Puzo’s examples in the *Godfather* chronicles immediately come to mind—African-American youth involved in the crack cocaine industry simply invested in material icons of wealth like cars, cellular phones, jewelry, and au couture fashions...” (Neal 369). Thus, unlike the gangster narrative, which moves away from the past as quickly as possible in order to ensure that the gangster’s eventual fall is as steep and tragic as possible, the gangsta rap narrative follows a series of small climaxes, rising from the past, up to the present, and back down again to the past.

By contrast, the narrative of the classic gangster film is usually characterized by a rise and fall structure. The most “central” gangster films, namely *Scarface: The Shame of the Nation*, *Little Caesar*, and *The Public Enemy*, open with images of the gangster hero’s poverty. He wears shabby suits, eats in diners and commits petty crimes to stay ahead. Over the course of the

film the audience can vicariously indulge in the iconography of the gangster's accumulated success: flashy new suits, armor plated vehicles, plush apartments, and of course, a more beautiful, blond moll to replace his less-flashy, previous girlfriend (often a brunette).<sup>33</sup> However, as Robert Warshow has noted, the gangster's rapid rise to wealth and prominence is always followed by a "very precipitate fall" (102). Within the paradigm of the classic gangster film, gangsters rarely brooded about the past because their eyes were always fixed on the present and the future. Jack Shadoian explains "The [classic gangster] films occupy time present: there are no flashbacks"; instead these films move constantly forward, experiencing rising and falling action, followed by denouement and resolution (30).

### **1.1.2 Tracing the Ghetto Action Film to the Gangster Film**

While the gangster film is structured so that the gangster's past life of poverty is a distant memory by the time his wealth and his life are snatched away from him, the ghetto action film generally does not allow the audience to forget about the gangsta's origins in poverty. This is usually because the gangsta of the ghetto action film, in contrast with both the gangster and the gangsta rapper, is unable to acquire enough wealth to fully abandon his previous lifestyle. Jodi Brooks points out that whereas in the classical gangster film "plot duration is structured around the protagonist's rise and fall, in the contemporary [ghetto action film] there is no such rise and fall but, instead, random moments in an arrested and repetitive present" (366). Characters in ghetto action films do not come close to achieving the financial success of their cinematic predecessors,

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<sup>33</sup> The fetishization of blondes in gangster films is linked to the ethnic gangster's desire to obtain the trapping of WASP success. For instance, in *Scarface*, Tony lusts after Poppy (Karen Morley) in the same way that he lusts after his boss's fine silk robe and ornate apartment. In *Public Enemy*, Tommy "upgrades" his moll from the brown-haired Kitty to platinum blonde Gwen (Jean Harlow).

such as Tony Camonte or Rico Bandello, who purchase furniture, homes, and even real estate in their attempts to mimic the trappings of the upper classes. In contrast, despite their eventual financial success in the world of drug dealing, film gangstas rarely leave the ghetto. For instance characters like Caine (Tyron Turner) in *Menace II Society* and Ace (Wood Harris) in *Paid in Full* (2002, Charles Stone III) continue to live in the projects, despite owning luxury automobiles and expensive jewelry. Rather than using their money for “practical,” future-oriented purchases, such as a down payment on a house or a business, the gangsta spends as if he has no future. The ghetto action film also comments on the fleeting nature of wealth when we see newly monied gangstas getting robbed in broad daylight for their gold jewelry (*Boyz N the Hood*) or their new rims (*Menace II Society*). Wealth in the ghetto action film is to be enjoyed immediately because it could be snatched away at any moment.

Though the ghetto action film lacks the classic gangster film’s rise and fall structure, the former borrows many of its visual and thematic elements from its generic predecessor, including the gangster film’s semantics (a set of recurrent traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations and sets) and syntax (the thematic structures into which these elements are arranged). Perhaps the most important semantic element of the gangster film which is taken up by the gangsta film is its focus on a minority protagonist. Since the most infamous gangsters of the 1920s, like Al Capone, Meyer Lansky, Dutch Schultz and Dion O’Bannion, were all first or second generation immigrants,<sup>34</sup> it makes sense that their filmic counterparts were also identified as

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<sup>34</sup> See James M. O’Kane’s *The Crooked Ladder: Gangsters, Ethnicity and the American Dream* (1993) for a book-length discussion of how and why ethnic immigrants in America have used organized crime as one major vehicle of upward mobility.

immigrants or foreigners (Rosow 103-104). From the late 1920s onward,<sup>35</sup> the criminality of the Italian-American and Irish-American gangster protagonists was usually tied to their status as second-generation Americans: “As an immigrant or suave sophisticate associated with the evils and excitements of the city, the movie gangster in the twenties evolved as a mythic representation of America’s urbanization” (Rosow 105).

For instance, although Tony Camonte’s Italian heritage is never explicitly mentioned in *Scarface*, it is alluded to constantly. In one scene, which was added after final shooting had wrapped to appease Production Code restrictions,<sup>36</sup> a group of “concerned citizens,” marked both sartorially and vocally as middle- to upper-class, Anglo-Americans, complain to the publisher of *The Evening Record* that his newspaper glorifies the gangster by filling their front pages with his exploits. The publisher’s response is that ignoring the gangster will not end his criminal actions, but rather, it is the duty of the “citizens” to vote for laws that “Put teeth in the Deportation Act. These gangsters don’t belong in this country. Half of them aren’t even citizens.” In this scene, the unwanted immigrant, Other to the (Anglo) American citizen, is labeled as a threat to the safety of the nation and its children. By positing deportation as the solution to America’s crime problems, the film implies that immigrants are responsible for the high rates of crime in urban centers. Later in this scene, a hunch-shouldered, modestly dressed Italian immigrant, who sits apart from the Anglo members of the citizens group, complains in a thick, Italian accent that gangsters “[b]ring nothing but shame to my people.” Here, the “acceptable” immigrant, who is working class, humble, concerned about his

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<sup>35</sup> Prior to the late 1920s, most gangster heroes had ethnically ambiguous names like “Black Mike” in *Outside the Law* (1921, Tod Browning) “The Blizzard” in *The Penalty* (1920, Wallace Worsley) or “Fancy Charlie” in *Beating the Game* (1921, Victor Schertzinger).

<sup>36</sup> This scene was also shot by a different director because Hawks refused to comply with the Production Code Administration’s orders.

community, and yet does not expect to mingle with the middle- to upper-class members of society (emphasized by their separation within the *mise en scène*), is contrasted with Tony Camonte, who does not know his “place.”

Throughout *Scarface* Tony’s thick accent, street slang, and inability to command the vocabulary of the mainstream, Anglo society (he calls a writ of “habeas corpus” a writ of “hocus pocus”), is often played as a source of amusement to his assimilated, upper- and middle class contemporaries, as well as the audience. For instance, in one memorable scene Tony shows off his new, opulent apartment to Poppy (Karen Morley), the cultured, blonde moll he is attempting to seduce. The apartment has been carefully modeled on that of Tony’s boss (and Poppy’s former flame), Johnny Lovo (Osgood Perkins), who, despite his Italian sounding name, has found a way to assimilate into the surrounding Anglo culture. Tony, however, who can only mimic rather than possess true “class,” gets it wrong. After surveying the apartment, which is crowded with expensive, ornate decorations, Poppy comments “Kinda gaudy, isn’t it?” to which Tony replies, without a hint of irony, “Ain’t it though? Glad you like it.”<sup>37</sup> Here the gangster is positioned as a low class poseur who, even with money, cannot hope to attain the class and breeding of America’s upper-class WASPs. Although, theoretically the immigrant gangster can “pass” in the Anglo-dominated society around him (as Johnny Lovo does), in the classic gangster film, the gangster’s ethnic difference is highlighted as a defining characteristic. He may look the part, but his true nature will always be that of a social Other. Of course, Jonathan Munby has pointed out that these scenes of the gangster’s social mimicry, common in many gangster films

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<sup>37</sup> A similar joke was used in *Little Caesar*; Rico Bandello, who is clearly marked as an Italian by his name (and the fact that his character was modeled on Al Capone), is often depicted as rube who does not have the class and culture (obtained through genetics) to properly handle his money. In one scene, after Rico has obtained some measure of wealth and power in the gang, he goes to visit Big Boy (Sidney Blackmer), the suave tycoon who uses his influence to control the city. When Rico admires a painting in a gold frame and is informed that Big Boy paid \$15,000 for it, Rico responds “Fifteen thou...boy, them gold frames sure cost plenty of dough.”

of the 1930s, might express a more ambivalent message about social, economic and ethnic boundaries. He cites a scene in *Little Caesar* in which Rico holds a formal banquet for all of his friends, which eventually disintegrates into a food fight. Munby claims the humor in this scene arises not because we are laughing at Rico for trying to be like the upper classes, but because Rico, in his bumbling, reveals the hypocrisy of elitism and its rituals: “In 1930 (a post-Crash and pre-Prohibition repeal context), an audience composed largely of lower-class to lower-middle-class urbanites would have laughed at the ridiculous insistence that Americans should kowtow to such an artificial code” (50-51). However, I would argue that despite their subversive potential, such scenes still affirm the belief that “success” is embodied by assimilating into the dominant, WASP culture, and that the immigrant can only hope to “ape” this culture, rather than be accepted by it.

Perhaps it is a mark of Hollywood’s own ideological confusion in the early 1930s, of a pull between political values and the need to maintain the status quo, that characters like Tony and Rico could simultaneously be figures of rebellion *and* stereotypes which reinforced the xenophobic belief systems of numerous Americans. Between 1919 and 1930, the United States saw a resurgence in “nativism,” which was characterized by the fear that the constant influx of immigrants into the country would somehow lead to a diluting or compromising of “pure” American stock.<sup>38</sup> For instance, the thesis of Madison Grant’s popular book *Passing of a Great Race* (1916, 1930) is that the entire race is divided into three “progressively more superior” types—Mediterranean, Alpine, and Nordic—with Nordic (the most fair-skinned) being the most “superior” race. Other books and popular magazines of the time, such as *Scientific American* and *Saturday Evening Post*, also addressed the threat of an influx of “unassimilable” immigrants

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<sup>38</sup> For a detailed discussion of the relationship between the gangster film and nativism, see Jonathan Munby’s *Public Enemies, Private Heroes: Screening the Gangster from Little Caesar to Touch of Evil*.

(Thatcher 24-42). Thus the movie gangster of the 1930s was a popular (if controversial) figure because he both aroused and placated several different, but related, social anxieties of several different social groups: the need of the disenfranchised to see competing figures of American success, a Depression-laden audiences' desire for active, socially transgressive heroes, the middle- and upper class WASP fear of these depictions upon the aforementioned classes, the nativist's concern over urban crime and immigration, the Catholic Church's desire to provide films with a moral message, and the reaction of the censors and the film industry to all of these competing concerns.

Much as the ethnic immigrant became a scapegoat for America's social ills in the 1920s and 1930s, the black inner city criminal served a similar purpose throughout the late 1980s, leading Jonathan Munby to argue that "The distance between the promise of inclusion and the reality of exclusion for European immigrants at the turn of the century has eerie parallels with the postwar African-American story." He adds that both the gangster and the gangsta, while rooted in real life circumstances, also have strong symbolic value for audiences "The recourse to gangster imagery by African Americans is more than a reflection of the 'criminal' reality of ghetto life. It has a deeper symbolic worth in connecting today's disenfranchised with a tradition of dissent" (Munby 3). Like the film gangster, the film gangsta also appeared at a moment in American history when the white, middle class turned its eye upon a new "threat" to its safety and stability—the ghettos of New York City and South Central Los Angeles. The gangsta's status as a threat is implicitly tied to his racial marginality.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Mark Winokur has called the film gangsta, a "Homo marginalis," which is a reference "both to the way the new-ethnic gangster is a completely self-conscious gloss on previous entries in the genre and also a purposefully marginal figure" (20).

This marginality resulted from the fact that, as I mentioned, the 1980s marked a time when sensational discourses about the ghetto, crime and the gangsta were being circulated in politics, cinema<sup>40</sup> and the media in general. S. Craig Watkins, as well as other critics (Guerrero, Massood, Chan, et al.), pinpoints Reagan's political campaign and, later, his administration, as key in informing the white mainstream's understanding of the inner city and the urban, lower class, black population:

Reaganism's hyperbolic dramatization of the drug crisis often relied on metaphoric language to infuse popular ideologies about urban dislocation with images of urban criminality and moral degeneracy that created a sense of national crisis and moral outrage. The criminalization of black youth and inner-city communities was necessary to legitimate the crisis. (37)

The Reagan administration effectively tapped into the nation's sense of morality by appealing to the "old fashioned" values of hard work and sacrifice as a pointed contrast with what were seen as the liberal "excesses" of the 1970s. Indeed the Reagan ideology drew upon a binary rationale of individual responsibility versus immorality in arguing for tougher treatment of criminals (Jordan 64). For example, the concept of the "welfare queen," first described by Reagan in his 1976 bid for the Presidency,<sup>41</sup> was effective because it implied that the welfare system fosters laziness and that this laziness leads to an immoral abuse of the government's benevolence. Ghetto action films like *New Jack City* and *Boyz N the Hood* often capitalized on the image of

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<sup>40</sup> As critics such as Robin Wood in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (1986) have noted, the conservative bent of 1980s cinema is a reaction against the liberal cinema of the 1970s and the policies of the Carter administration. This "ideological agenda of reassurance" included films which return American society to pre-Vietnam war values: "Beneath superficial distinctions, seemingly discrete Reagan-era genres champion common philosophies of racial integration, conformity to proper gender roles, and meritocratic economic mobility" (Jordan 63).

<sup>41</sup> Reagan described the welfare queen in this way: "She has 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards and is collecting veteran's benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands. And she is collecting Social Security on her cards. She's got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names" ("Welfare").

the “welfare queen,” using it both to condemn the welfare mother as well as subvert the stereotype, often at the same time. By focusing on individual pathology, the stereotype of the welfare queen (which was later proven to be an exaggeration)<sup>42</sup> places the blame for the inner city’s crime and poverty on its victims rather than the social structure as a whole, thus encouraging the dismantling of the welfare state (Watkins 219).

A far more threatening “marginal figure” in the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, was the young, black male criminal (Massood 166, Lott “Marooned” 78-81). The films of the ghetto action cycle often reference this media-constructed image and the fear that the image of the young black male evokes merely by being present. For instance, early in Ernest R. Dickerson’s *Juice*, the four protagonists are filmed in a long shot as they walk down a New York City street. As they pass a meek-looking white man, he reacts by running over to the other side of the street, pressing himself as close to the edge of the frame as possible. This scene is meant to be comical because these boys are not dangerous criminals out to mug an innocent white man (though one, Bishop, is an ex-convict), but rather four boys skipping school for the day. Along the same lines, the “villain” of *Menace II Society*, O-Dog (Larenz Tate), is described by his best friend, Caine, as “America’s worst nightmare...young, black, and don’t give a fuck.” Here *Menace II Society* effectively comments on the status of the social Other of the 1990s—black male youth. However, the major difference between the Otherness of the ethnic immigrant gangster and that of racialized gangsta lies in the question of assimilation. For example, by the time we are introduced to Mike Lagana (Alexander Scourby), the Italian gangster in *The Big Heat* (1952, Fritz Lang), he has already achieved assimilation into the white, American, upper class; he lives in a mansion and is able to throw a formal dance in honor of his teenage daughter. In a reversal of the confrontation

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<sup>42</sup> The woman cited by Reagan, Linda Taylor, was ultimately charged with defrauding the government for \$8,000 (“Welfare Queen Becomes Issue”).

between an Anglo detective and the ethnic gangster in the classic gangster film, the stolidly middle class detective Dave Bannion (Glenn Ford) feels uncomfortable and out of place in Lagana's home: "We don't talk about those things in this house, do we? No, it's too elegant, too respectable. Nice kids, party, painting of Mama up there on the wall. No place for a stinkin' cop!" While it is possible for gangster figures like Lagana or Johnny Lovo to adapt the speech patterns, social rituals and consumption habits of the Anglo majority, the gangsta will always be marked as different from the white majority because of his skin color.

In addition to this emphasis on the minority protagonist and the links between his marginal status and his criminality, the gangster film and the ghetto action film also share an emphasis on the city setting. Since D.W. Griffith's *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), the gangster film has come to represent not just the world of crime, but specifically, the world of crime and the city (Schatz 84). In the world of the gangster film, the city is, like the gangster's marginal status, inextricably linked to criminality.<sup>43</sup> Of course, being a product of the city, the gangster also knows how to use it to his advantage. For instance, as Fran Mason has noted, the opening sequence of *The Public Enemy* emphasizes the facility with which the two young boys (who will eventually grow up to be gangsters) navigate through the city when chased by the police (17). By depicting the boys' ability to move through the complex and dangerous urban space in unconventional ways (they slide down the escalator's rails to escape the pursuing police), the film foreshadows the way in which the city can both protect its inhabitants (by rewarding their knowledge of it) and corrupt them (because the anonymity of the city makes crime possible). The city of the gangster film is also synonymous with modernity. The tools with

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<sup>43</sup> Critics (MacArthur, Rosow, Clarens, etc.) have argued that the gangster film is indicative of the tradition of "antiurbanism" in American thought, characterized by writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Theodore Dreiser and Upton Sinclair.

which the gangster conquers the city—the telephone, the automobile, and most importantly, the Tommy gun—are all products of modernity and the city. Without these “violent extensions” (McArthur 28), which prove how the gangster has harnessed the fascinating and yet intimidating space and technology of the modern city, he would be powerless to organize his men, move around or enforce his will. These items also form some of the basic semantic units, or icons, of the gangster genre. However these icons (with the exception of guns) contain no inherent threats in and of themselves—it is only within the syntax of the gangster film that they take on a threatening presence. For example, an automobile becomes a weapon of assassination in films like *Scarface*.

The city of the classic gangster film is filmed in such a way as to be both alluring and terrifying. So while films like *Scarface*, *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy* all feature the positive side of the modern city, like splashy night clubs and fine hotels, they also dwell on its dark side: the alleys where bodies are unceremoniously dumped, the flophouses where drunks live out their final days and the abandoned warehouses that serve as the perfect locale for mass murder. Rico Bandello’s rise and fall, for example, is marked visually by the urban locations he inhabits throughout the film. When we first meet him he is eating a plate of spaghetti at the counter of a country diner. At the height of his career he is being toasted by his cohorts at a flower-strewn banquet table at the Palermo club. And we know Rico has hit bottom again when a shot of a neon sign reading “Clean Beds 15¢” dissolves into the interior of a bare flophouse. Moments later Rico shambles past an abandoned, urban warehouse, where he is ultimately gunned down by his righteous nemesis, Detective Flaherty (Thomas E. Jackson). The film need not show us Rico’s death; his descent to the flophouse indicates that he has hit rock bottom. This is the price the classic gangster pays for enjoying the heights of luxury.

Similarly, the menace of the modern city is also defined by its soundtrack; the urban soundscape of the classic gangster film is filled with the sounds of the gangster's technology: the ringing telephone, the clacking keys of the reporter's typewriter as he rushes to get the gangster on the front page, the squeal of the getaway car and of course, the ratatatat of the Tommy gun. Indeed, Thomas Schatz contends that Hollywood's conversion to sound in the late 1920s, combined with "America's desperate social and economic climate," was the primary catalyst in the formation of the gangster film's classic cycle: "The new audio effects (gunshots, screams, screeching tires, etc.) encouraged filmmakers to focus upon action and urban violence, and also to develop a fast-paced narrative and editing style" (Schatz 83), making the gangster into "an embodiment of the threat of the modern" (Mason 4). If violence and brutality are a hallmark of the classic gangster film, then, according to Stephen Prince, sound is necessary to make that violence "palpable" to the viewer, to "give it texture and rhythmic form" and to help overcome "the abstracting effects of the silent image" (*Classical* 12).

Like the gangster film, the ghetto action film is also defined by its city setting. And while some gangster films, usually gangster comedies, do venture outside of the city for all or part of the narrative (*Brother Orchid* [1940, Lloyd Bacon], *A Slight Case of Murder* [1938, Lloyd Bacon], *White Heat*, *High Sierra* [1941, Raoul Walsh], *Key Largo* [1948, John Huston]), ghetto action films are never set anywhere other than the city (or the low income suburbs located on the city's perimeters). Ghetto action films also frequently open with long establishing shots which record images of the city, usually neighborhoods in New York City or Los Angeles, overrun with crime, poverty and violence, in almost fetishistic detail. In the ghetto action films taking place in Los Angeles neighborhoods (*Boyz N the Hood*, *Menace II Society*, *South Central*, *Friday* [1995, F. Gary Gray], *Set it Off*), the ghetto is marked by small, identical, Spanish-style

ranch homes rimmed with yards of parched grass and palm trees. The sun is almost always shining. This iconography, which ironically replicates that of the stable, middle class suburb, stands in contrast to that of the ghetto actions films set in New York City or Chicago (*New Jack City*, *Juice*, *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, *Fresh* [1994, Boaz Yakin], *Clockers* [1995, Spike Lee]). The iconography of the latter is most similar to that of the classic gangster film, in which all levels of the social ladder exist in one city, and the lighting is often dark and shadowy. For instance, the opening sequence of *New Jack City* begins with an extreme long shot of 1980s New York City from the perspective of Ellis Island. The camera moves towards the city, retracing the mythical path of immigrants coming to America, then cuts to bird's eye shots of skyscrapers, crumbling tenements and parking lots. As we see these images we hear the voices of reporters discussing the rising unemployment rates, poverty statistics, drug related shootings, and "turf war" violence. In this sequence, images of New York City's Reagan-era prosperity are contrasted with images of extreme inner city poverty (the city spaces we see in Los Angeles based ghetto action films contain little or no images of prosperity). As in the classic gangster film (and other genres which demonize the city, including the social problem film, *film noir* and some science fiction films), the urban space of the ghetto action film takes on a personality of its own; it is corrupting, threatening and ultimately destructive. "Thus," according to Todd Boyd, "the contemporary spectacle of the 'ghetto' operates primarily to reinforce the dominant society's view of African American culture as a deprived wasteland" (42).

While references to the cityscape in the ghetto action film can be specific, like a street sign or a famous bar, they can also be quite generalized. One common visual motif is the use of the "instructional" street sign, such as "Stop" (the first image we see in *Boyz N the Hood*), "One Way Street," "Do Not Enter," and the ubiquitous "Police Line: Do Not Cross," which serve

to control the actions and mobility of the characters living in the ghetto. This regulation of mobility in the ghetto action film is further emphasized by the ubiquitous presence of the police; these films are filled with images of police cars and helicopters patrolling the cities. Manthia Diawara argues that this constant reminder of surveillance performs a function similar to that of Foucault's panopticon. The residents of the ghetto are so aware of their own policing that they have internalized the perception of themselves as criminal or have come to believe that this policing is natural, leading these residents to police themselves (22). This policing of the ghetto is a consequence of the (perceived and actual) criminality of the ghetto: "The overemphasis on crime, drugs, and violence by politicians and the news media creates...[an imaginary class relationship which]...codes black youth as dangerous and also authorizes the deployment of military-style tactics and technology as necessary for the maintenance of social order" (Watkins *Representing* 216). Rather than address the conditions which caused the rampant criminality in Los Angeles in the mid- to late 1980s (joblessness combined with the lucrative possibilities of selling crack cocaine), the government's solution was, according to Robin D.G. Kelley, to increase surveillance, turning these neighborhoods into virtual war zones: "Police helicopters, complex electronic surveillance, even small tanks armed with battering rams became part of this increasingly militarized urban space" (*Race Rebels* 193). This point is made clear in the opening of *Boyz N the Hood* when a panning camera reveals a series of paintings that are hanging on the wall of an elementary school classroom: a body in a coffin under a grey sky, a man with raised arms who has been caught in the headlights of a police car, and an LAPD helicopter with its searchlights blazing. This sequence reveals how much the city's children have internalized their own surveillance, even at an age when they do not understand its import. Other reminders of containment in the ghetto, which have now become the iconography of the ghetto (and by

extension the ghetto action cycle as a whole), include: barred windows and doors, chain link fences and the series of locks that adorn the doorways of every home. These recurrent images of chains, locks and bars call up images of a cage or a jail, which how the ghetto is often described in the ghetto action film.

As with the gangster film, the cityscape is defined, not just by what is seen, but also by what is heard. No matter where characters are located in the ghetto, whether outside or in their homes, day or night, there are the constant sounds of police sirens, police radios, and the hum of helicopter blades as they hover over neighborhoods. As Watkins points out, “this use of offscreen space is accompanied by shots of blacks engaged in non-threatening acts, suggesting that the entire community is wrongfully criminalized” (217). For instance, in *Boyz N the Hood* we see Tre’s girlfriend, Brandi (Nia Long), attempting to study in her living room amidst the sounds of gunfire and police sirens. She eventually gives up her studies in frustration, revealing how the ghetto is an inhospitable environment for social betterment. Another common sound heard in the filmic ghetto is of barking dogs, an inexpensive form of home security. It is interesting, however, that unlike other ubiquitous sounds of the ghetto, like sirens, gun shots, squealing tires and revving engines, these dogs rarely appear on screen. Therefore it seems that the sound of barking signifies not so much the presence of the animal, but rather the presence of a disturbance somewhere in the neighborhood. Dogs bark to warn their owners of an intrusion, so the constant dog barking that pervades the audio space of the ghetto, adds to the general feeling of unrest and disruption there.

One final link between the gangster film and the ghetto action film is their mutual preoccupation with spectacular displays of violence and aggression. As I mentioned, the death of the gangster at the conclusion of the gangster film is often spectacular and excessive. In *The*

*Public Enemy*, for example, Tom Powers, who has vowed to go straight, is kidnapped from the hospital by a rival gang. When the doorbell rings at the Powers' home, where everyone is busy preparing for Tom's arrival, a low angle shot reveals an almost-dead Tom, wrapped in a gray blanket from head to toe and with a bloodied bandage around his head. His body balances for a moment in the doorway, teetering between life and death, between home and the outside world, then crashes forward, a disturbing and unexpected end to the gangster hero. Tom's death appears especially brutal both because he has repented *and* because he appears to have suffered before dying. Despite the fact that Cagney's body could not be presented as riddled with bullet holes, it is nevertheless far more violent than the films that would follow it (because *The Public Enemy* was made in 1931, just before the Production Code was strictly enforced in 1934). After the establishment of the Production Code Administration, most screen deaths were "sanitized," employing what came to be known as the "clutch and fall aesthetic," in which a character appears to "fall asleep" and drop out of the frame (Prince *Classical* 89). Because of the Code's restrictions, the violence found in gangster films, particularly in the *noir* gangster films of the 1940s and 1950s, was focused less on gunplay and more on human to human contact. One of the most notoriously violent *noirs*, *The Big Heat*, revels in moments of unnecessarily sadistic violence, such as when the maniacal Vince Stone (Lee Marvin) puts out his cigarette on a girl's hand because she was annoying him and later throws a scalding pot of coffee into the face of his former moll, Debby (Gloria Grahame), because he suspects she has been cheating on him. Such moments are shocking, Stephen Prince tells us, because acts of aggression appear more violent and disturbing when the human body appears to suffer—and the clearest way to depict suffering is to proffer images of the body being violated or disfigured (which is why the "clutch and fall" is less disturbing than seeing a character being stabbed) (*Classical* 27). Thus the close up of

Debby's scarred face when she first removes her bandages is extremely disturbing, particularly since the other side of her face remains as lovely as ever.

Another characteristic of the gangster film's violence is the gangster's ability to kill without regret. In *Scarface*, for example, moments after he has ordered his sidekick, Guino, to shoot Johnny Lovo point blank, Tony arrives on the doorstep of Lovo's apartment. Seeing Tony's ragged appearance, disheveled hair and wild eyes, Poppy begins to tremble "What's happened?" she asks, "Where's Johnny?" For a moment it appears that Tony might be experiencing regret over murdering his boss, but instead he is cold "Where d'ya think?" The camera then lingers on Tony's face, which is half covered in dark shadow, as he slowly looks Poppy up and down "Go pack yer stuff" is all he tells her. And while we might expect such a moment to upset or at least frighten Poppy—who is nothing more than one of the many spoils Tony "inherits" from his former boss—another close up reveals that she is excited by Tony's command. She smiles and dashes to pack her suitcase. Similarly, in *Little Caesar* Rico ensures a murdered gang member is given an elaborate funeral, "Tony deserved a swell send-off. Poor kid," as if he was not the person directly responsible for the man's death. At times, the gangster even appears to enjoy the act of killing, and the film itself makes a spectacle of this violence. In *White Heat*, a hostage locked in the back of Cody Jarrett's trunk complains "Its stuffy in here, I need some air." Cody responds by shooting holes through the trunk (and the hostage), all while happily chomping on a drumstick. And in *Key Largo*, Johnny Rocco's (Edward G Robinson) henchmen revel in pushing around the old, wheelchair bound owner of the Key Largo hotel. This trend towards using violence against characters who are traditionally considered "helpless"—women, the handicapped and the elderly—reaches its nadir in *Kiss of Death* (1947, Henry

Hathaway) when Johnny Udo (Richard Widmark), the film's maniacal gangster, pushes an elderly, wheelchair-bound woman down a flight of steps.

The ghetto action film also contains many moments which portray violence for violence's sake, or violence which surpasses the needs of the narrative, thus appearing as a spectacle in and of itself. Usually these moments are unexpected, erupting when we are least expecting violence. In *Menace II Society*, "America's worst nightmare," O-Dog, is characterized by his willingness to commit violence whenever the mood strikes him. Rather than expressing concern over the possible repercussions of murdering two Korean store clerks, for instance, he revels in it; he steals the video surveillance tape that recorded these murders and plays it over and over to the delight of his friends. O-Dog treats the images on this videotape as a gangster film in which he is the "star," bragging that he can sell the tapes for "59.95." He smiles, laughs and cheers as he watches it, and at the climax, when he shoots the clerk, he urges his friends to pay attention to his "performance." In other words, once the images are played on the screen before him, the brutal murders cease to represent reality to O-Dog, becoming, instead, yet another image of media violence. This moment is also a commentary on the viewer of *Menace II Society*, who, like O-Dog's mythical customers, have paid money in order to witness random acts of violence on screen. In another scene, a local crack addict begs O-Dog for drugs, first offering him two cheeseburgers, and then oral sex. O-Dog, incensed by the implication that he might enjoy a homosexual act, shoots the boy without warning and then proceeds to eat the previously rejected hamburgers which have fallen out of his victim's hands. O-Dog's friends barely register that a murder has taken place before moving on. This moment, much like Udo's execution of a helpless, wheelchair-bound grandmother, is meant to reveal just how dangerous the gangsta/gangster has become.

The violence visited upon the protagonists in films like *New Jack City*, *Menace II Society*, and *Set it Off*, are clearly modeled on the violence of the gangster film, that is, a violence which is meant to connote the concept of retribution for disrupting the social order: Nino Brown (Wesley Snipes) is shot down on the courthouse steps by a citizen who is enraged that the criminal charges against him were dismissed while Caine, despite his decision to give up gang life for good, is shot down as he packs his car to leave for Georgia. And every character, with the exception of Stony (Jada Pinkett Smith), is brutally gunned down at the conclusion of *Set it Off*. When these characters die, even though some of them, like Caine, are presented as conflicted and therefore, potentially moral, we are meant to understand that such a death is inevitable. The gangsta, like the gangster, cannot continue to live his/her excessive lifestyle without paying the penalty. These deaths, like the deaths at the end of the classic gangster film, hold a doubled meaning. On the one hand the elimination of the gangsta represents social justice and a restoration of the status quo. These characters, who attempted to live outside of and/or to thwart the very system that keeps the fragile social structure from collapsing, must be destroyed. However, the sadness we feel over their deaths also signifies the viewer's desire to challenge the social system as well, to break out of his/her preordained social role.

All violent moments in the ghetto action cycle do not, however, carry the same meaning, and here is where we can see this cycle diverging from the gangster film. Other films in the ghetto action cycle use violence much differently, as a form of social criticism. The climax of *Boyz N the Hood* is the graphic, drive-by shooting of Ricky (Morris Chestnut), the local high school football star, as he and Tre (Cuba Gooding, Jr.) walk home from a convenience store. At the moment of Ricky's death the sound disappears from the film, forcing us to concentrate on his jerking body and the blood that slowly seeps across the front of his shirt and out of his mouth.

This scene is presented via a bird's eye shot of Tre cradling Ricky's dying body, a shot which is repeated almost exactly with Caine's death at the conclusion of *Menace II Society*. The difference between these two moments, however, is that we are meant to see Ricky's death as unwarranted (he was not a gangsta, just the brother of one) and unfair (he had just been recruited for a football scholarship to the University of Southern California). Furthermore, the violence of Ricky's death is not so much a reflection on those who committed it (the shooters are a rival gang who appear only briefly in the film) than it is a commentary on the environment in which Ricky lives. The ghetto, this scene tells us, is a location where death is doled out indiscriminately. One need not be directly involved in the criminal world, the environment itself is toxic. Likewise in *Fresh*, the title character (Sean Nelson) and his 12-year-old crush, Rosie (Natima Bradley), go to watch a neighborhood basketball game. When Jake (Jean-Claude Le Marre), a local dealer and gang member is humiliated by the ball-playing skills of a young boy, his reaction is to shoot the boy to death. This surprising and violent moment is then compounded when the camera pans away from the body of the dead boy to reveal the body of Rosie, who caught a ricocheting bullet in the neck. This shot, filmed in medium close up, is extended and brutal—as Rosie grasps at her neck, choking, Fresh places his hands on her neck and twitching legs, in an attempt to soothe her. And as with Ricky in *Boyz N the Hood*, Rosie's death is not a result of her actions but rather her presence in the ghetto. Her death then becomes a critique of such living conditions, in which young children are always at risk of dying, even when engaged in typical childhood activities, like hanging out at the playground. In the classic gangster film, the innocent are never killed, or if they are, these deaths take place offscreen, anonymously.<sup>44</sup> For example, when Cesca (Ann Dvorack) is killed by a stray bullet in *Scarface*, it is only after

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<sup>44</sup> For example, during a montage sequence depicting Tony's rise to the top of the beer trade in *Scarface*, we see a keg roll off a truck and crash into a ground-level apartment, followed by a woman's agonized scream.

she has decided to grab a gun and help her brother in his shoot out with the police. In the classic gangster film, the city is deadly as a result of the gangsters who choose to inhabit it (they make it what it is and it kills them in the end); in the ghetto action film, it is the *city* that is lethal and that makes the gangsta what he is. It is this key difference, among others, which places ghetto action films like *Boyz N the Hood* and *Fresh* on the borders of the gangster genre. In the next section I will investigate if there any precedents for these themes and motifs in the broader gangster genre.

## 1.2 READING THROUGH THE PARADIGM OF BORDER TEXTS

Thus far I have been defining the gangster genre (and by extension, the ghetto action film) by its most central texts: the classic cycle of the early 1930s (*Scarface*, *Little Caesar*, *Public Enemy*), celebrated gangster *noirs* (*Key Largo*, *White Heat*, *The Big Heat*), seminal New Hollywood entries (*Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Godfather* trilogy) and remakes of the classic cycle (*Scarface* [1984]). These films are most often cited in studies<sup>45</sup> devoted to the gangster genre because they so clearly adhere to what has been previously defined as the genre's central iconography (minority protagonists, machine guns, speeding cars, dystopic city setting), conventions (the gangster's violent come-uppance in the final reel, the acquisition of increasingly more expensive possessions, the "rise to the top" montage) and plot formulas (the rise and fall narrative, the conflict between individual and society, the gangster's attempts to assimilate, etc). By focusing on these texts, which fit neatly into the described parameters of the genre, a scholar of the

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<sup>45</sup> See Colin MacArthur's *Underworld USA* (1972), Thomas Schatz's *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System* (1981), Marilyn Yaquinto's *Pump 'Em Full of Lead: A Look at Gangster's on Film* (1998), Carlos Clarens' *Crime Movies: An Illustrated History*, Nicole Hahn Rafter's *Shots in the Mirror*, Jack Shadoian's *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster/Crime Film*, John Baxter's *The Gangster Film*, etc.

gangster film is able to turn an otherwise unwieldy group of diverse films into a short, tidy list of icons, formulas and conventions. Keeping this approach in mind, I have spent the first part of this chapter providing examples of what previous scholars have recognized as being the genre's most central texts, all based upon the criteria established by the gangster film's classic cycle, and their defining characteristics, in order to understand how or why the ghetto action cycle is most consistently understood as being a subgenre or late cycle of the gangster film. However, this particular paradigm is, as I will argue, insufficient for explaining the nuances of so-called "gangsta" films like *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991, Matty Rich) *South Central* (1992, Steve Anderson), *Fresh*, *Clockers* or *New Jersey Drive* (1995, Nick Gomez).

By privileging the classic cycle, critics inadvertently discount the almost seventy-five gangster or gangster-related films which were released *prior* to *Little Caesar*, between 1912-1930 (Rosow 395-196). With silent entries like *The Regeneration*, *Underworld* and *The Racket* (1928, Lewis Milestone) and early talkies like *The Racketeer* (1929), *Lights of New York* (1928, Bryan Foy) and *The Doorway to Hell* (1930, Archie Mayo), why is it that most genre studies contend that the gangster film does not reach its classic stage until the appearance of *Little Caesar*? Fran Mason's response to this question is that this tendency to emphasize the significance of the classic cycle is a Catch-22—the classic cycle has come to define the genre because critics have decided that the classic cycle defines the genre (6). And Jonathan Munby believes that "these three films have probably selected themselves as 'classics' because of the way they *stand out* rather than fit into the bulk of gangster film production at the time" (16). Munby suggests that because these three films were more violent and controversial (with their overt depiction of class conflict and immigrant unrest) than the gangster films which preceded them, leading to the well-publicized backlash from industry censors, they received far more

attention over the course of film history. Furthermore, because the genre's seminal critical text, Robert Warshow's "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," focused primarily on *Scarface* and *Little Caesar* "many critics have followed Warshow in identifying common themes within this period which have come to be seen as timeless dominants of the entire genre" (Mason 7).

Given that this classic cycle coincided with the introduction of sound, the streamlining of the studio system in the 1930s and the importance of Warshow's work—it is not surprising that the trio of gangster films released at the start of the decade, starring three dynamic actors (two of which, Cagney and Robinson, would eventually become icons of the gangster genre), would fix themselves in the minds of critics and audiences alike as "classics." The gangster film, however, is a heterogeneous genre with multiple meanings which change depending on the subject being treated and the social, cultural and industrial context in which a particular film was produced. There are the post-Code G-Man films (*G-Men* [1935, William Keighley]), gangster *noirs* of the 1940s and 1950s (*The Big Combo* [1955, Joseph H. Lewis]), heist films involving big time gangsters and small time hustlers (*The Asphalt Jungle* [1950, John Huston], *The Killing* [1956, Stanley Kubrick]), the French homage to American gangster films (*Rififi* [1955, Jules Dassin], *Breathless* [1960, Jean Luc Godard], *Bob le Flambeur* [1955, Jean-Pierre Melville], *Shoot the Piano Player* [1960, Francois Truffaut]), 1960s youth-targeted biopics (*The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond* [1960, Bud Boetticher], *Machine Gun Kelly* [1958, Roger Corman]), Mafioso films released in reaction to the televised Kefauver hearings (*Murder, Inc.* [1960, Burt Balaban and Stuart Rosenberg], *The Brotherhood* [1968, Paul Fejos], *The Valachi Papers* [1972, Terence Young], *The Godfather*), 1980s nostalgia films (*Once Upon a Time in America*, *The Cotton Club* [1984, Francis Ford Coppola], *The Untouchables* [1987, Brian De Palma], *Harlem Nights* [1989, Eddie Murphy]), and of course, 1990s gangsta films. All of these

films have, at one time or another, been considered gangster films, with some being closer to the accepted definition of the “gangster film” (*The Godfather*) than others (*The Asphalt Jungle*). It would be difficult, however, to come up with a definitive syntax and semantics to apply to this disparate group of films, unless it were extremely broad (and therefore, having little explanatory power).

Another major problem with privileging the classic cycle is that the syntax most commonly associated it—that is, “the individual versus society”—is vague and broad enough to be applied as equally to *Little Caesar* and *New Jack City* as to *Wall Street* (1987, Oliver Stone) or *Falling Down* (1993, Joel Schumacher). Therefore, adherents of the classic gangster cycle are, more than anything, indicating a preference for one particular manifestation of this theme: the gangster whose ambition brings him to the pinnacle of success and then brings about his demise. The films of the classic cycle, therefore, are not definitive of the entire gangster genre. Rather they represent the defining moment of *one particular cycle* of the gangster film. Furthermore, while we might assume that by limiting our definition of the “classic” gangster film to just three texts, it should be easy to define and yet, even among these three central films there are key differences. For example, one of the most well-documented conventions<sup>46</sup> of the classic cycle (if not the entire genre) is its “rise and fall narrative.” The syntax of the individual versus society, which is solved by the elimination of the individual (i.e., the gangster) and a return to the status quo, is reflected in this convention, thus tying semantics (the rise and fall) to syntax (the film’s themes). The gangster film, we are told, depicts the process of the individual drawing himself out of the crowd until he is ripe for shooting, either by the police (at the conclusion of *Scarface* and

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<sup>46</sup> See Colin MacArthur’s *Underworld, USA*, p. 35, Eugene Rosow’s *Born to Lose*, p. 27, Jonathan Munby’s *Public Enemies, Public Heroes*, pp. 43-44, Marilyn Yaquinto’s *Pump ‘Em Full of Lead*, p. 25, Carlos Clarens’ *Crime Movies*, p. 53, Fran Mason’s *American Gangster Cinema*, p. 6, etc.

*Little Caesar*) or by a rival anxious to step into that dangerous spot (the opening of *Scarface*): “The gangster film contains the clearest exposition of [the dilemma of a capitalist democracy], the extremities of success and failure—exhilarating, top-of-the-heap life and brutal death—being its (initial) stock and trade” (Shadoian 6).

However, *Public Enemy*, one of the classic texts, does not follow this pattern. Tom Powers, while he certainly gains more wealth and power than he began with over the course of the narrative, never reaches a position of power that places him “alone at the top.” Throughout the film Tom is just another enforcer in a larger gang; he may be able to give orders, but he still must take them from his boss, Paddy Ryan (Robert O’Connor). Tom purchases expensive suits and a flashy car (though it appears that he and Matt own the car together), moves out of his mother’s house and into a hotel room (rather than a more permanent marker of success like an apartment or mansion), and, just prior to the film’s climax, “upgrades” his moll from the mousy Mae Clark to the much flashier (and blonder) Jean Harlowe. But these are small steps forward in Tom’s financial success rather than steep rise found in *Scarface* and *Little Caesar*; Tom is still a foot soldier, one of the struggling masses (rather than the guy on top). Thus Tom is murdered at the film’s climax, not because he reached the peak of his success (and thus needed to be eliminated), but because he foolishly attempted to avenge the death of his best friend, Matt (Edward Woods) by attacking the gang who murdered him. True, Tom is “alone” when he takes his vengeance, but he is not killed for imposing his all-consuming desire for wealth and power on others. The purpose of this example is to show how even the three films of the classic cycle cannot fully live up to the criteria that they have been credited with establishing.

Finally, the concept of a classic cycle is problematic since it is dependent upon the idea of generic evolution, a concept which has been discounted by several genre critics. For

example, after studying early film Westerns, Tag Gallagher discovered that genres are often divided arbitrarily into discrete evolutionary stages: “Every argument that evolution exists at all comes down not to evidence mustered through representative sampling but either to bald assertions or to invidious comparisons between a couple of titles—a ‘classic’ western versus a ‘self conscious’ western—selected specifically to illustrate the assertion” (203-204). Much like Tudor’s “empiricist dilemma,” which questions how it is possible to define a genre without first defining a corpus (and vice versa), the concept of the evolutionary model in genre studies often seems to *precede* the evidence of its existence. In the case of the gangster genre critics focused on three primary texts, the classic cycle, and then placed the films which preceded and followed these texts (i.e., films made before 1930 and after 1932) into predetermined evolutionary stages. “A film is considered ‘classic’,” Gallagher explains, “when it matches a critic’s paradigm of the ideal western. But the paradigm is entirely arbitrary, with the result that there is some disagreement about which pictures are ‘classic’ and which have evolved *astray*” (Gallagher 204, emphasis mine). In other words, the evolutionary model privileges certain films, making them “central,” while other texts, which stray from this model are placed on the “borders” of the genre. The gangster film is, this model tells us, defined by the classic cycle and all other films in the genre are merely more or less faithful variations on the same theme; stray too far and the film risks exclusion from the corpus.<sup>47</sup> If we follow this model, then every gangster film released prior to *Little Caesar* in 1930 would be “preclassical” texts, or films which display, to quote Henri Focillon, a “crude inarticulateness” (11).

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas Schatz even goes so far as to write that the genre itself “died” when the classic cycle came to an end “After 1933, the genre went into a period of diffusion and decline which extended throughout the decade, and only occasionally was it able to recapture the visual style, characterization, and narrative complexity of the classic gangster sagas” (99). He later adds that: “In retrospect, the gangster genre is one of the few Hollywood formulas that did not grow old gracefully, that did not become richer and more complex with age” (110).

Rather than assume that all early gangster films are somehow undeveloped or embryonic, the gangster genre is more accurately described as a series of cycles, that is, as smaller groupings of films which appear at a particular historical moment, “live” for a period of time, and disappear when interest in the subject wanes. A cyclical view of genres not only bolsters the arguments proffered by critics like Rick Altman, Steve Neale and Tag Gallagher, who discount the concepts of a defining classic cycle and generic evolution, it also provides a more nuanced account of the social, historical and industrial factors behind the creation of genre films. Steve Neale also suggests this approach to the genre, writing that the history of the gangster genre is “marked more by abrupt and intermittent transformations and short-lived cycles than by smoothly evolving continuities” (79). Neale has argued that by ignoring the significance of the gangster films released prior to *Little Caesar*, critics “are led to view films like *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* and *Underworld* as isolated examples rather than as participants in distinct generic trends, and to underestimate the extent to which gangsters and gangster films had existed in various well-established forms prior to the advent of *Little Caesar*” (79). The contributions these “preclassical” films have made to the genre have been devalued because they are not indicative of the classic cycle, and yet, there is no essential reason for valorizing the icons, formulas and conventions of the classic cycle over any other cycle in the gangster genre, which highlights the arbitrary lines of evolutionary stages. Abandoning the evolutionary model we can now return to the “preclassical” silent films and provide them with a more useful label, one that provides a context both for their existence and for the many films which followed in their syntactic footsteps.

To illustrate this point the remainder of this chapter will argue that the gangster film’s “border texts,” that is, films which *do not* exemplify the criteria established by the genre’s

classic cycle (such as “melodramatic” silent films like *Regeneration*) trouble traditional definitions of the genre (i.e., that gangster films are “hard” and “masculine”). This move reveals how the melodramatic conventions of these silent films are quite central to the genre, effectively shifting the configurations of the gangster film’s corpus and modifying its generic “blueprint.” A cyclical approach to genres not only supports the claim that generic evolution is an ahistorical and totalizing approach to genre study, it also activates more potential meanings within the genre as a whole, revealing more about the gangster film’s various generic inheritors than what is gleaned from a focus on its classic texts alone. By understanding the importance of the gangster genre’s neglected cycles we can see where the ghetto action cycle originated, the historical significance of its icons and conventions, and how it belongs to a rich tradition of cinematic conventions arising out of a very specific public need.

### **1.2.1.1 The Importance of Melodrama in the Gangster Film**

In *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System* (1981), a seminal text in genre studies and one that is often adopted in the film studies classroom or excerpted in anthologies, Thomas Schatz opens his chapter on the gangster film with the following statement “The gangster genre has had a peculiar history. The narrative formula seemed to *spring from nowhere* in the early 1930s, when its conventions were isolated and refined in a series of immensely popular films” (81, emphasis mine). Here the privileging of the classic cycle does damage to genre history, forcing the critic to ignore or gloss over variations and anomalies in order to create a false continuity and stability and to ensure that a genre’s definition does not change with time. Likewise, in his study of the gangster film, *Underworld USA* (1972), Collin MacArthur states “There had, of course, been crime films before *Little Caesar* [1930], but they cannot, iconographically or thematically, be called gangster films” (34). MacArthur’s

explanation for why a film like *Underworld*, which is perhaps the most well-known, preclassical gangster film, next to *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*, is not a “true” gangster film, is because it lacks the plot formulas associated with the classic cycle (Bull Weed is a thief rather than a bootlegger, the plot lacks a discernible “rise and fall” structure) and because it is silent. As I mentioned, the introduction of sound is thought to have brought the gangster film to generic maturity because its arrival in 1927 signaled a new cinematic realism (Clarens 34), a realism now considered to be central to the genre. Jack Shadoian believes that “The addition of sound gave the gangster film a true potency” (33) while Eugene Rosow explains that “By 1930, the sound of gangster films had established a realistic tone as one of the genre’s qualities. Gangster films began to have a characteristic sound—a mixture of the American idiomatic language of the streets, gun shots, automobile sounds, jazz and more” (133). In fact, Rosow discovered that by the late 1920s the realism of a gangster film was often judged by its use or misuse of sound.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, in his study of the use of the term melodrama, Russell Merritt found that “By the mid-Thirties, one way critics bracketed off talkies from the outmoded silents was to describe the earlier films as ‘voiceless melodramas,’ custodians of ‘melodramatic arm-waving, implausible plots, and primitive sets” (29).

Merritt addresses another significant reason for why silent gangster films are considered to be “preclassical,” and thus marginal, to the gangster genre—the association of silent films with the category of “melodrama,” and this label’s implicit ties to a mode of filmmaking considered to be “old fashioned” (Merritt 29) and antithetical to the “modern” look, sound and subject matter of the classic gangster film. When discussing silent gangster films,

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<sup>48</sup> Rosow explains in a review of *Tenderloin* (1928, Michael Curtiz), a reviewer complained “Dolores Costello said ‘cahn’t’ with too broad an ‘A’ for the Tenderloin district and Conrad Nagel’s voice was too blasting, country, evangelistic...” (qtd. in Rosow 133).

including texts like *The Regeneration*, *The Penalty* (1920, Wallace Worsley) and *Underworld*, Fran Mason puts them in the category of “old fashioned melodrama” (1). Mason acknowledges that these silent gangster films did have an impact on sound gangster films, but he clarifies that these films had an impact on the genre *in spite of* the fact that they are “strongly based in melodrama” (3), as if the mode of the melodrama is utterly antithetical to the conventions and style of the gangster genre. Jonathan Munby and Thomas Schatz both associate the concepts of silent film with melodrama, while Gerald Peary describes *Underworld* as being centered on “gang war melodramatics” (“The Racket” 7). Even early sound films like *Quick Millions* (1931, Rowland Brown) and *Doorway to Hell* (Rowland Brown, 1931) are excluded from the center of the generic corpus based on their tendency “to reiterate the melodramatic form and ideology of the silent gangster film” (Mason 5). Thus, texts deemed “preclassical” in the evolution of the generic canon, or those texts which have not quite fully formed into a “true” example of the genre, are those which can be aligned with the conventions of melodrama.

Before attending to why this claim is erroneous, it is first necessary to briefly tease out just what is meant by the term “melodrama” when these critics cite it in their criticisms. This broad term, with roots in literature, theater, film and of course, academic criticism, has a long and disputed history, carrying different meanings depending on when, in what context and by whom it is used. In fact, it has been argued that because of melodrama’s numerous definitions, both broad (melodrama is the opposite of realism) and narrow (melodramas are Technicolor films made in the 1950s, centering on issues of domestic strife and directed by German expatriates) that: “It is difficult to escape the impression that one of the principle uses of melodrama is that of a dumping ground to enforce a spurious kind of critical tidiness” (Merritt 26). The varying uses of this term points to the difficulty of applying generalized labels to a large

group of films, particularly when those labels have a history of shifting meanings. We must therefore, always be aware of what Rick Altman has called “generic maps.”<sup>49</sup> The “generic cartography” of the term “melodrama” (like all generic terms) has had “multiple superimposed maps of differing ages and extents” throughout its history (70). So what “map” or meaning of melodrama is being invoked in the aforementioned histories of the gangster film?

Today the most commonly understood definition of melodrama is a film dealing in “excess,” hence the common response, when someone reacts to a situation with a seemingly disproportionate amount of emotion, “Stop being so melodramatic.” Today the term melodrama is usually interchangeable with terms like “soap opera,” “tear jerker” and “woman’s film” (Merritt 25), implying that these are films dealing with the personal, the intimate, and with emotions, rather than with the public, the exterior and with actions. Merritt adds “It is a term generally applied to any machine-made entertainment marked by verbal extravagance, implausible motivation, contrived sensation or spurious pathos” (25). Peter Brooks believes that since the 1970s the term melodrama has been “all but synonymous with a set of subgenres that remain close to the hearth and emphasize a register of heightened emotionalism and sentimentality: the family melodrama, the woman’s film, the weepie, the soap opera” (Singer “Female Power” 94). The pervasiveness of this particular definition of melodrama is likewise reflected in the popular understanding of the term. For example, currently the definition of “melodrama” on wikipedia.com (the people’s encyclopedia), states: “In melodrama there is constructed a world of heightened emotion, stock characters and a hero who rights the disturbance to the balance of good and evil in a moral universe. In recent decades the term has taken on pejorative connotations” (“Melodrama”).

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<sup>49</sup> Altman argues that because geographical maps have changed their borders, capitals, and even names throughout history, it would be foolish to use a map from 1871 to navigate the contemporary French landscape.

This commonly accepted definition of melodrama as a film which is emotionally manipulative, excessive, feminine, contrived and unrealistic arose in the 1970s, when several prominent film scholars, including Thomas Elsaesser, Molly Haskell and Laura Mulvey, attempted to theorize melodrama as a specific type of film, namely the 1940s and 1950s “tear-jerkers” centering on the trials of the domestic space and/or women in general (Neale *Genre and Hollywood* 1971). Rick Altman explains that “Until the 70s the term family melodrama was rarely used, and the term woman’s film was never associated with the genre of melodrama. Yet during the 80s, critics regularly conflated the two categories, eventually styling the woman’s film and family melodrama as the very core of melodrama as a genre” (*Film/Genre* 77). Thomas Elsaesser’s article, “Tales of Sound and Fury” (1972) was particularly instrumental in establishing this link between the category of melodrama and the depiction of roiling emotions in a domestic space (Neale *Genre and Hollywood* 181). According to Elsaesser’s conception, the protagonist of the melodrama is tortured by the status quo but repeatedly fails to act in a way that might alter it or provide him/her with that elusive object of desire. These characters are unable to get what they want through direct action—in fact, their “behavior is often pathetically at odds with the real objectives they want to achieve” (365). Thus, one central theme of the melodrama, according to Elsaesser’s definition, is the necessity of sacrifice and denial in place of excess and passion: “Melodrama confers on [its protagonists] a negative identity through suffering, and the progressive self-immolation and disillusionment generally end in resignation” (363).

Elsaesser further argues that the melodrama is incompatible with what is understood to be the hard, masculine, action-oriented mode of the Western and gangster film because of its emphasis on emotion, betrayal, redemption, and sacrifice. Indeed, melodrama, with its preoccupations with the domestic, was viewed pejoratively as “mystifying resolution of

‘real’ social conflicts’—which realism would seek to lay bare” (Gledhill *Home* 13). This opposition between action and emotion, male and female, realism and fantasy, gangster film and melodrama is also taken up by Thomas Schatz, who divides six major genres into two categories, “genres of order” and “genres of integration.” The latter grouping of films, which includes the musical, screwball comedy and domestic melodrama, have a “doubled hero” (almost always the heterosexual couple), are set in “civilized space” and “trace the integration of the central characters into the community” (Schatz 34). This integration is only made possible by having the individual(s) yield to the needs of the community, and by internalizing conflicts and translating them into emotional terms. These “genres of integration” usually conclude with the union (or marriage) of the heterosexual couple, who, throughout the film, represented opposing world views. In contrast, “genres of order,” like Westerns, gangster films and detective films, have an individual hero and are set in a “contested” space, meaning the hero questions the contradictions of his milieu: “Conflicts within these genres are externalized, translated into violence, and usually resolved through the elimination of some threat to the social order” (34). In the case of the gangster film, this “threat” is the gangster himself.

However, in *Genre and Hollywood* Steve Neale carefully examines how and why the term “melodrama” has been used in industry discourse since the early 1900s through the present, and uncovers a very different definition. He explains that up until the 1970s, “melodrama” was used to refer to stories that were “a hodge-podge of extravagant adventures, full of blood and thunder, clashing swords and hair’s breadth escapes” (qtd. in Neale 180). In other words, according to reviews and studio parlance, the word “melodrama” indicated a film that was suspenseful, thrilling, action-packed and even “realistic” (180-185), and also implied that a film *lacked* sentiment, romance or female characters. Neale discovered that, up until the

1970s, melodramas were defined as action films emphasizing seedy characters, events and settings, such as prisons, crime syndicates and the wild, wild west (settings which imply a more “realistic” milieu). Thus, according to this definition of melodrama, just about every gangster film ever made can be considered “melodramatic.” Linda Williams provides a similar reading of the term melodrama, arguing that rather than being a marginal, “feminine” mode, melodrama is actually the most prevalent filmmaking mode of classical Hollywood cinema: “melodrama is a peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action” (42). Thus, Williams claims that films as diverse as *Philadelphia* (1993, Jonathan Demme) and *Rambo: First Blood, Part II* (1985, George P. Cosmatos) are “melodramatic” in that they contain a besieged victim for whom we feel sympathy, a narrative concerned with the “retrieval and staging of innocence,” and a conclusion marked by either a last minute rescue or the pathos of “too late” (42). In these films melodrama is characterized by the belief that guilt, innocence and meaning can be uncovered, displayed, and publicly recognized (Williams 54). The melodrama, understood as a “text of muteness,” uses visual spectacle to create a coherent, clearly demarcated meanings that could not otherwise be produced from language. Brooks explains:

The use of mute gesture in melodrama reintroduces a figuration of the primal language onto the stage, where it carries immediate, primal spiritual meanings which the language code, in its demonetization, has obscured, alienated, lost. Mute gesture is an expressionistic means—precisely the means of melodrama—to render meanings which are ineffable, but nonetheless operative within the sphere of human ethical relationships. (72)

According to this definition, a film might be considered melodramatic if it relies on a visual revelation of virtue and/or villainy experienced as a spectacular and moving sensation by the viewer. Again, under this definition of melodrama, a large portion of gangster films, ranging from *The Public Enemy* to *The Godfather*, can be considered melodramatic.

The point of this brief foray into the history of the term melodrama is not to establish which definition is most historically accurate. Rather, I have attempted to delineate the most commonly understood definitions and connotations of the term in film studies in order to understand what critics like Mason, MacArthur, Munby, Schatz, Peary and others, were referencing when they argue that “melodrama” defines the preclassical gangster film or those films existing on the borders of the gangster genre. It would seem that they invoke the term melodrama to indicate films filled with excessive behaviors, heightened emotions, sacrifice, the dialectic between resolutions occurring “in the nick of time” and “too late,” and a definitive feeling of loss. This form of melodrama marks the silent gangster film, particularly through their reliance on the redemption/regeneration narrative. This particular narrative plays itself out in two basic ways: the reforming mentor narrative or the love triangle narrative. In the reforming mentor narrative the gangster hero, through contact with a reforming figure, turns away from his criminal lifestyle. Yet, having made this choice almost always proves to be a case of “too late” since the gangster invariably loses someone close to him as a result of his past misdeeds or is killed, which results in pathos. In the love triangle narrative the gangster falls for a woman who makes him into a cuckold or rejects him for a law-abiding citizen. Another variation on this theme is having the gangster’s right hand man/best friend reject a life of crime (and by extension, the gangster himself) for the love of a woman. In both cases the rejection of the gangster by someone he loves is tied to his excessive, criminal nature. If unreformed at the film’s conclusion,

the love triangle drives the gangster to destroy himself. If, however, this experience with rejection provides the gangster with an opportunity for self reflection, the love triangle can also motivate him to commit an act of personal sacrifice and therefore gain redemption.

According to Gerald Peary, the themes of sacrifice and redemption were common in 1920s gangster films.

In gangster movies of the twenties—*Underworld*, for example—a gang leader who committed terrible deeds, including murder, was allowed to absolve himself gracefully of his sins through heroic sacrifice, often to save the sacred love of a young and innocent couple. By giving up his life for this moral cause, he would instantly bring meaning to his existence, demonstrating knowledge of his sins and a desire for reformation. (*Little Caesar* 20)

I believe that silent gangster films have frequently been characterized as working under the melodramatic mode because of this emphasis on emotion over action. While the classic gangster hero is initially marked by his self serving desires for monetary and social success (hence his ability to murder and steal without regret), the melodramatic gangster of the redemption/regeneration narrative displays the ability, if only at the last minute, to reflect on the needs and desires of others. That the gangster either dies or loses someone close to him as a result of these past mistakes, a choice which he mourns in the film's conclusion, is what sets this particular plot formula in the mode of the "too late." As Linda Williams explains "A melodrama does not have to contain multiple scenes of pathetic death to function melodramatically. What counts is a feeling of loss suffused throughout the form" (70). The classic gangster hero, by contrast, is typically viewed as a character that is unable to fully reflect upon the devastation he has caused. If he is mournful at the end of the film, it is because he is mourning himself. For

example, Rico Bandello laments “Mother of Mercy, is this the end of Rico?” during his final moments of life; he remains unchanged at the conclusion of the film.

### **1.2.2 The Redemption/Regeneration Cycle: Love Triangles and Reforming Mentors**

According to several genre critics (including Clarens, Rosow, McCarty, Munby, etc.), *Underworld* represents a fundamental change in the style of silent gangster films, mainly because it was “less fanciful” and “grittier” than its forbearers (McCarty 40) and because it depicted the criminal environment from the gangster’s point of view (Munby 25). According to Eugene Rosow, *Underworld*’s prominence in the history of the gangster genre can be linked to its use of certain key icons and conventions which would later be lionized by critics as indicative of the genre (123): the dark shadowy city seen only at night, a lavish underworld celebration, the detailed depiction of the crowded, run-down city milieu and the use of newspaper headlines to further key plot points. Most importantly, according to these critics, *Underworld* helped to define the classic gangster persona: Bull Weed (George Bancroft) is uneducated and crass but also fearless and “street smart”; he is aware of and encourages his own media celebrity; and most importantly, he sees himself as “different” from those around him—as destined for greater things—such as when he spots a flashing neon advertisement that reads “The City is Yours” and he believes it to be true. While almost all of these elements had appeared in one form or another in earlier gangster films: “The box office success of *Underworld* simply focused the attention of producers and moviegoers as well as film historians on the genre” (Rosow 124).

Despite its critical and commercial success, *Underworld* is mostly understood in terms of how it paved the way for the classic cycle rather than for the impact it had the gangster genre as a whole. In fact, the presence of the melodramatic love triangle between its protagonists

Bull Weed, Rolls Royce (Clive Brook), his sidekick, and Feathers McCoy (Evelyn Brent), his moll, and the character's self sacrifice and redemption at the film's conclusion has served to marginalize *Underworld* in the gangster film's overall corpus (MacArthur 34). However, I believe that this love triangle narrative can also be understood as an enduring convention passed along by the commercially successful *Underworld* to the rest of the genre. In *Underworld*, love, passion and loyalty are the focus of the film, rather than the gangster hero's unrelenting greed, his desire to reach the "top" or to achieve the American Dream. Bull Weed executes his rival, Buck Mulligan (Fred Kohler)—a fatal decision resulting in his arrest—not to gain money or power, but because Buck had violated Feathers' honor. And once Bull is sentenced to death for Buck's murder, he appears to accept his fate. There is no bargaining (as we see in the conclusion to *Scarface*) or anger (as in *Little Caesar*); Bull accepts his death sentence with a smile, even playing checkers with his guard on the eve of his execution. His ultimate decision to break out of jail is not motivated by a desire to save his own skin, but rather by his suspicion, spread through newspaper headlines, that Rolls Royce and Feathers are engaged in a secret affair (e.g., "Feathers McCoy Proves Fickle: Killer's Girl Takes New Sweetheart").

The film's final scene takes place in Bull's secret hide out, which is being pummeled with machine gun fire. This scene enacts a very different ending from that found in the classic gangster film. Rolls returns to the hide out—risking his life and the wrath of the scorned Bull—in order to help Bull and Feathers escape. The camera then cuts between a shot of Bull, who is solitary and wild eyed in the frame, and Rolls and Feathers, who, believing that Bull will kill them both, embrace one last time. This shot/reverse shot series highlights the gangster's isolation—that he is doomed to live and die alone while others are allowed some measure of happiness and companionship. At this moment Bull has an epiphany—that Rolls and Feathers

have not betrayed him and that they deserve to live and to be together. This decision—the film’s emotional climax—is marked with a medium close up of Bull embracing the wounded Rolls like a lover. Bull then decisively pushes his friends through a secret door in the hide out, explaining “I’ve been wrong, Feathers—I know it now—I’ve been wrong all the way—” Bull’s decision, made “in the nick of time,” is an act of personal sacrifice and thus, redemption; he will hold off the police so his friends can escape and then turn himself in. On the other side of the door we see Feathers collapse in anguish.

When the police finally take Bull back to jail—so that he can be hung—his captors are perplexed “And all that got you was another hour!” one policeman remarks. To this, Bull smiles and explains “There was something I had to find out—and that hour was worth more to me than my whole life.” This conclusion, based on emotion and heroic personal sacrifice, is considered antithetical to the gangster genre, which centers on action and self serving impulses. Such conclusions are characterized as melodramatic because “[these protagonists] take on suffering and moral anguish knowingly, as the just price for having glimpsed a better world and having failed to live it” (Elsaesser 378). Upon seeing the true love between Rolls and Feather—as opposed to the “purchased” love he once shared with Feathers—Bull realizes that he is the one who must be sacrificed. Such “impossible standards” are another hallmark of the melodramatic mode (Elsaesser 378). The melodramatic gangster, as a figure of excess, must sacrifice his own well-being in some way for the sake of those who represent a more moderate approach to life (earlier in the film Bull Weed is established as an individual out of place in society when Rolls Royce informs him “You were born 2,000 years too late”). These films leaves the audience with the feeling that if only the gangster had not been “too much”—too aggressive, too violent, too greedy, too jealous—his current pathos could have been avoided.

This focus on the “melodramatic” love triangle is not limited to its appearance in *Underworld*; rather, it is a convention dating all the way back to the very first entry in the genre, *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*, when the Little Lady (Lillian Gish), chooses her poor, musician husband (Walter Miller) over the flashier Snapper Kid (Elmer Booth). Though the Kid could offer the Little Lady a life of excitement and easy money, his excessive nature is less appealing than the stability offered by a “regular” guy, her husband. This choice of mediocrity over excitement is comically illustrated in a three shot, as the Snapper Kid surveys his bland competition, gives the Little Lady a questioning look, as if to say “Really? Him?” and then shrugs his shoulders and exits the frame. The convention of the love triangle (specifically in which the gangster is the one who loses the girl), has either a central or prominent role in films like *Doorway to Hell* (1930, Archie Mayo), *City Streets* (1931, Rouben Mamoulian), *Manhattan Melodrama* (1934, W.S. Van Dyke), *The Roaring Twenties* (1939, Raoul Walsh), *High Sierra* (1941, Raoul Walsh), *White Heat*, *Black Caesar* (1973, Larry Cohen), *Billy Bathgate* (1991, Richard Benton) and *Casino* (1996, Martin Scorsese), among others. Even the classic cycle, against which such conventions are opposed, contains two prominent love triangles. In *Scarface*, Tony might be undone by his desire to “have” the world but what seals his fate is his “unnatural” devotion to his sister, Cesca (Ann Dvorak), who only has eyes for Guino (George Raft). Likewise, in *Little Caesar* Rico is cast aside by his best friend, Joe Massara (Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.), who abandons the gang life to dance professionally with his love interest (Glenda Farrell). While Joe’s rejection does not lead directly to Rico’s downfall, it clouds his judgment, driving him to drink (a vice he had always rejected) and eventually lose his hold on his power.

Granting generic significance to the convention of the love triangle shifts the configurations of the gangster film’s corpus, altering the criteria or the blueprint which the genre

presumably follows. This repeated convention is significant because it is consistently attached to the same syntax from film to film. In all of these gangster films, the protagonists' loss of love and emotional connection is tied to his status as the gangster hero. The gangster, defined by his individuality, by his "difference" from everyone else (he is more aggressive, more charming, more brutal, more determined than his peers, etc.), cannot successfully function in a relationship requiring the union of two individuals. The female eventually rejects the gangster, even if she initially loves him, for the mate who is willing to be a part of the crowd and accept the status quo. If "[t]he gangster's whole life is an effort to assert himself as an individual to draw himself out of the crowd, and he always dies *because* he is an individual" (Warshow 103), then the rejection of the gangster by his love is a profound marker of his status *as* film gangster. He cannot maintain healthy long term relationships with other human beings, because he is simply "too much."

Another melodramatic formula established in the silent gangster film is that of the reforming mentor who motivates the gangster to become a law-abiding citizen. These films, like *The Gangsters of New York* (1914, James Kirkwood), *Regeneration*, *The Penalty*, *Big Brother* (1923, Alan Dwan), *Fool's Highway* (1924, Irving Cummings), *Thunderbolt* (1929, Josef von Sternberg) and *Me, Gangster* (1928, Raoul Walsh), among others, all stress a socioeconomic explanation for criminality. These ruthless gangsters are not inherently evil, their mentors reason, rather, they are a product of the debilitating modern city. *The Penalty*, for example, tells the story of the reformation of a legless gang leader named The Blizzard (Lon Chaney). After spending most of the film plotting and committing illegal acts, it is revealed that the Blizzard's devious criminal mind is not so much caused by the unnecessary amputation of his legs during his childhood, but rather, by a blood clot which formed in his brain during the same traffic accident

that injured his legs. This plot twist enacts the theory that the modern city and its technology (i.e., cars) can literally alter the impressionable mind of a child, thus skewing his understanding of right and wrong. In the film's conclusion, Blizzard is miraculously cured of his desire to take over the city of San Francisco when the doctor who performed his first botched surgery twenty-seven years ago, Dr. Ferris (Charles Clary), removes the evil-inducing blood clot from his brain. The doctor is convinced to perform this surgery by his kind-hearted daughter, who tells him "If you have made him what he is, it is all the more our duty to help him," implying that the perils of modern city living, which create criminal, can be corrected when society takes responsibility for its own.

Likewise, in *The Regeneration* (as well as the similarly themed *Big Brother* and *Fool's Highway*), the film depicts, in great detail, the poverty and abuse that characterized the gangster hero's childhood. The film's first image is of the young protagonist, Owen (John McCann), in dirty, tattered clothing, watching the body of his last remaining parent being loaded into the back of a hearse. Things only get worse for Owen when his equally poor neighbors, the Conways, take him in, subjecting Owen to the drunken and sometimes violent actions of "old man" Conway (James A. Marcus). This emphasis on an socioeconomic explanation for crime is further supported by the film's *mise en scène*, which is filled with dirty, barefoot children who loiter on the front stoop and stairs of Owen's tenement and in the streets. The film highlights these moments through the use of an iris, focusing our eyes on the spectacle of abandoned children. For example, the film creates a direct link between childhood poverty and criminality when we see a shot of the young Owen sleeping in the gutter, framed again with an iris. This shot then dissolves into an image of Owen at seventeen, now fully in the grips of the criminal lifestyle.

Meanwhile, a socialite, Marie Deering (Anna Q. Nilsson), is so affected by the poverty in the Bowery (as well as the admonishments of a socialist soapbox lecturer), that she becomes a social worker at a local settlement house, successfully convincing Owen to abandon his criminal lifestyle in favor of reading, writing and social work. When Owen is called back to gang life to fulfill one last obligation, Marie invariably gets in the cross fire and is shot by Owen's nemesis, Skinny (William Sheer). However, Marie's death becomes a necessary vehicle to illustrate Owen's regeneration; moments later, when Owen has an opportunity to avenge her death by shooting Skinny, he sees an apparition of Marie's face before him. Owen collapses in tears, abandoning his previous way of life and becoming, instead, a moral man. The film's final line is both mournful and filled with hope "It was she, my Mamie Rose, who taught me that within me was a mind and a God-given heart. She made of my life a changed thing and never can it be the same again."

Films like *The Penalty* and *The Regeneration* reason that even though their protagonists were essentially "raised" to be criminals, with enough determination and the attentions of a good-hearted middle- to upper class mentor, they can reform and reenter the fold of society. Redemption/regeneration narratives thus position the gangster as both the fated victim of poverty *and* a responsible agent of his own destiny. It is significant, however, that Owen does not truly reform until he is faced with the devastating consequences of his gangster lifestyle—the death of his true love—which is the direct result of Owen's poor choices. After Marie dies, we see a close up of a petal dropping off of a bouquet of flowers—a symbol of Owen's love—that he had presented to Marie just before he agreed to participate in his criminal lifestyle one last time. Similarly, *The Penalty's* message—that criminals are made, not born, is effectively tempered in the film's conclusion when the Blizzard, now married to the undercover agent who

had initially infiltrated his hat factory in order to send him to jail, is shot down by one of his previous gang associates. “Fate chained me to Evil,” he says in his last gasps, “for that I must pay the penalty.” Even though Blizzard’s criminality is positioned as the work of Fate and circumstance, and he has been reformed, he must, nevertheless, be duly punished for it.

Silent gangster films like *Regeneration* and *The Penalty* have been excluded from the center of the gangster film’s generic corpus because in the classic cycle, the concept of redemption is rejected. In these films Rico Bandello and Tony Camonte die, unrepentant, in a hail of bullets. Marilyn Yaquinto thus criticizes *Underworld*’s conclusion as “sappy,” adding that “The theme of redemption at the end of *Underworld* struck others [in addition to scriptwriter Ben Hecht] as a compromise to an otherwise great gangster tale” (20). She adds “*Underworld* had put Bull Weed in the lead but insisted he be redeemed in the end. That sabotaged his integrity as a gangster and turned him into something else” (27). A true gangster hero, as defined by the classic cycle, is one who is irredeemable and incapable of reform. When these redemption/regeneration themes reappear in films like *The Roaring Twenties*, Yaquinto explains that having the gangster “serve a master other than himself and to be rehabilitated” is part of his post-code “defanging” (57). Again, in critical discourse the trope of redemption or regeneration represents a compromising of the gangster hero, an anomaly in the genre’s otherwise homogenous blueprint. Indeed, Colin MacArthur argues that up until the appearance of post-code films like *Dead End* (1937, William Wyler) “the explicit attitude of the gangster film to the criminal had been a simple one. Criminals are born, not made; they are incapable of reform and can be stopped only by being destroyed” (39).

Despite these claims, critics like Steve Neale argue that the “topoi of ‘redemption, reformation and rehabilitation’ have been prevalent in the genre since its inception. Likewise,

“their perpetuation in films...[throughout the 30s and 40s]...suggests that they comprised a formula more deep-rooted, more long-lasting and thus more ‘classical’ than the classical formula itself” (*Genre and Hollywood* 80). Jonathan Munby adds that since early silent gangster films borrowed their social realist perspective from the photojournalism of photographers like Jacob Riis, “The gangster story had been traditionally told from a socially reforming point of view” (21). In fact, like the “rise and fall” narrative, the convention of the unrepentant gangster is *not* a consistent one, even within the classic cycle. For instance, at the conclusion of *The Public Enemy*, as Tom Powers lies in a hospital bed after failing to massacre his enemies, he *does* repent for his sins; he apologizes to his mother and brother and promises them that he will return home as soon as the hospital releases him. But before Tom can make good on his promise he is kidnapped, tortured and dumped at the doorway of mother’s house. This plot formula, in which the gangster repents, rehabilitates or commits an act of self sacrifice (which is itself an act of redemption), recurs frequently throughout the history of the genre, in films like: *Angels with Dirty Faces*, *The Last Gangster* (1937, Edward Ludwig), *The Roaring Twenties*, *Lucky Jordan* (1942, Frank Tuttle), *High Sierra*, *Kiss of Death* (1947, Henry Hathaway), *Force of Evil* (1948, Abraham Polonsky), *The Brotherhood* (1968, Paul Fejos), *The Godfather III* (1990, Francis Ford Coppola), *A Bronx Tale* (1993, Robert DeNiro), *Carlito’s Way* (1993, Brian DePalma), *Boyz N the Hood*, *Menace II Society*, *Fresh*, *South Central*, *American Me* (1992, Edward James Olmos), *Things to do in Denver When You’re Dead* (1995, Gary Fleder) and *Road to Perdition* (2002, Sam Mendes), among others.

Taken together, these redemption/regeneration-themed narratives (which hinge on either a love triangle or a reforming mentor figure) with their similar characters, settings and themes, constitute one recurring cycle of the gangster film. Cycles are tied to the economic

and/or critical success of one specific film (in this case, *The Regeneration*) and, as I have been arguing, the cultural zeitgeist. In other words, film cycles become economic or critical successes precisely because they dramatize a contemporary social problem, trend or interest. Film cycles, because they capitalize upon much briefer moments in time than genres, are, in general, a more accurate indicator of the cultural climate in which (and out of which) they were produced. The redemption/regeneration cycle of the gangster genre, which originated in teens and twenties, reflects a general trend in silent films towards promoting the ideals of “Progressivism,” a political movement which arose in response to the vast changes<sup>50</sup> in American cities brought by industrialism at the turn of the century. Progressive leaders sought to improve crowded, unsanitary city living conditions through self help programs and settlement houses, fought for worker’s compensation, child labor laws, minimum wage, the forty-hour work week and widows’ pensions, and attacked government corruption. They also fought to establish building codes for tenements and to regulate sweatshops (Piott 5).

Despite the fact that this cycle of gangster films provided a sympathetic portrait of criminals and advocated social reform, their narratives of redemption and regeneration also placed the onus for reformation squarely on the shoulders of the urban poor: “[These] film narratives are dominated by a moralizing impulse that tempers the corrosive capacities of both consumerism (of which the cinema is an integral part) and alternative versions of Americanism to old-stock authority” (Munby 33). These tensions find a comfortable home in the gangster film which takes as its central concerns the struggle between individual success and social responsibility. Understanding this group of silent films within the context of the

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<sup>50</sup> Some of these changes included: the rise of sweatshop labor and piecework labor (over skilled labor), a swell in the nation’s urban population resulting in crowded tenement living, decreasingly returns and increasing debts among the nation’s farmers, etc. (Piott 1-5) For more on the relationship between cinema and the Progressive movement, see Chapter 2.

redemption/regeneration narrative provides a much richer understanding than applying categories like “preclassical,” “experimental” or even “silent melodrama.” The former categories are a limiting lens because they only allow us to understand these films in terms of what elements they contributed to the classic cycle, and what elements bar them from being considered “mature” gangster films. These labels do not explain what these films are like, what functioned they served for their audiences, or their role in the larger gangster genre. Likewise, by examining an individual cycle within a broader genre, we gain a better understanding of later cycles, where they originated and the historical significance of their icons and conventions.

### 1.2.3 Implications for the Ghetto Action Cycle

Although the ghetto action film and the gangsta persona are direct descendents of the gangster film, certain films, particularly *Boyz N the Hood*, *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, *Fresh* and *South Central*, do *not* deploy many of the icons, formulas and conventions traditionally associated with the so-called classic gangster film. Unlike the classic gangster narrative, in which we watch the gangster rise to the heights of success only to be destroyed at his peak, these films concentrate more on the psychological and emotional toll that the urban way of life inflicts on the protagonist. How is it then, that these films are so often called “gangsta films,” if they share so little in common with the classic gangster film? It appears that the aforementioned films are the generic descendents of the gangster film’s “melodramatic” redemption/regeneration cycle, originating in the 1910s and 1920s, as opposed to the classic cycle of the early 1930s.<sup>51</sup> Taking

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<sup>51</sup> Marilyn Yaquinto notes that “[*Boyz N the Hood*’s] preaching is more in tune with the melodramatic gangster films of the late 1930s, which emphasized how the same conditions that create a gangster can also harden another boy’s resolve” (194). I address the links between the ghetto action cycle and the social problem films of the late 1930s, like *Angels with Dirty Faces*, in Chapter 2.

up the melodramatic mode established by films like *The Regeneration* and *The Penalty*, these ghetto action films are marked by the dialectic between “too late” and “in the nick of time.” Even those ghetto action films that have reasonably happy and/or optimistic endings (*South Central*, *Fresh*, *Boyz N the Hood*), that conclude with our heroes escaping a life of crime “in the nick of time,” are nevertheless marked by a profound sense of loss, as with the bittersweet conclusion to *The Regeneration*. As Linda Williams explains “Happy ending melodramas can move us to tears...when—hope against hope—desire is fulfilled and time is defeated” (70). Films which end on a note of “too late,” in which the protagonist’s past outweighs his present desire for reform (*Menace II Society*) or in which his well intended plans for the benefit of others go terribly awry (*Straight Out of Brooklyn*), mark the moment when the tension between desire and reality is reduced (Williams 70-71). Furthermore because redemption-themed films like *The Regeneration* go to great pains to visually portray the poverty suffered by children living in the ghettoes of New York City and Chicago, it is fitting that the titles of 1990s films like *Boyz N the Hood*, *Straight Out of Brooklyn* and *South Central* refer to their locations. These locations become significant characters in the redemption/regeneration narratives; they influence characters to commit desperate acts and/or reform. This *mise en scène* hangs on to each character, defying him/her to acquiesce or fight.

More so than any of the other ghetto action films, *South Central* is a clear generic descendent of gangster redemption/regeneration narratives like *The Regeneration* and *The Penalty*. Like *The Regeneration*, *South Central* immediately establishes that its protagonist, Bobby (Glen Plummer), is a product of his criminalized South Central environment. We are told that Bobby’s father was jailed as a result of his role in the 1965 Watts Riots, leading to the formation of the neighborhood gang known as the “Deuces,” which Bobby now helps to lead. In

fact, it is a commitment to this environment, a desire to control his neighborhood, that drives Bobby and his gang to take justice into their own hands. As one Deuce puts it “we need to make our neighborhood safe for our kids and our bitches.” To this end, the Deuces appoint Bobby to murder a crack dealer who had been plaguing the neighborhood, an act which is later marked, symbolically, by a heart-shaped tattoo on Bobby’s cheek. As is common in the redemption/regeneration narrative, Bobby must come face to face with the consequences of his crimes; he is charged with murder and sent to jail for ten years, almost immediately after his son, Jimmie, is born. Much as Owen met Marie in the midst of his criminality, Bobby meets his own mentor figure, his Muslim cell mate, Ali (Carl Lumbly), while incarcerated. Ali tells Bobby that a man in his position has but three choices: “kill your enemy, go crazy or change.” He also tells Bobby that he must take responsibility for his past actions and for the care of his son (who was shot in the back during an attempted robbery), making him repeat the mantra “My thinking is mine. I choose.” At this moment in the film, “manhood” is redefined from pledging allegiance to the gang to pulling away from it and thinking independently, such as when Ali asks Bobby, on the day of his release: “Can you stand alone, like a man has to?”

In both *Regeneration* and *South Central*, knowledge obtained through literacy is promoted as the cornerstone of reformation. Marie instructs her charges at the settlement house in reading and writing while Ali coaxes Bobby to read the political writings of prominent black leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey. This point is especially significant since Du Bois advocated education as the primary means for the black population to achieve social, economic and cultural independence in America after the Reconstruction. For example, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), he argues that “The function of the Negro college, then, is clear: it must maintain the standards of popular education, it must seek the social regeneration of the

Negro, and it must help in the solution of problems of race contact and cooperation. And finally, beyond all this, it must develop men” (7). *The Regeneration* also promoted literacy and education as being integral to the reformation process, a tenet of the turn of the century Progressive movement. Progressivists believed that educating the working classes would help to make them more self sufficient, suitable for higher wages and thus raise their overall standard of living. Education, however, serves a slightly different role in the ghetto action cycle. Bobby’s problem is not that he cannot read, but rather that he is politically illiterate. His reformation is therefore tied to his budding awareness of his own oppression, an oppression which Ali reminds him, is cyclical and ongoing. Bobby’s mission is to put an end to this cycle of violence and jail with his new political awareness, which is likewise tied his role as both a man and a father.

To this end, Bobby’s only mission, upon his release from prison, is to find his now 10-year-old son, Jimmie (Christian Coleman), and to pull him away from a dangerous criminal career with the Deuces. After a climactic but predictable show down between Jimmie’s real father and his “gang father,” Ray Ray (Byron Minns), Bobby is successfully able to steer Jimmie away from the Deuces and back into his arms. The film’s final shot reveals father and son embracing; with this shot, Bobby’s redemption and regeneration are complete. In this redemption/regeneration narrative the love of a good, reforming woman (an important convention in the 1910s and 1920s cycle) is replaced first by a metaphorical father figure (Ali) and later by a real father figure. In both cases reformation is possible only because of male knowledge and love. Significantly, the one-sheet theatrical poster for this film is of this final embrace between father and son, and contains the tagline “A child’s chance to escape anger and injustice begins with one man...His father.” This poster and the film’s narrative imply that the problems of the ghetto both begin and end with black males. Redemption, in the ghetto action

cycle, is both the province and the responsibility of the male. This politicization of the male dates back to the Black Power movement, which focused its interests on male leaders and men in general, to the detriment of the women's liberation movement.<sup>52</sup>

Traces of this emphasis on male regeneration and male leadership are apparent in the ghetto action cycle's fetishization of the father-son relationship (and the demonization of the mother-son relationship). For example, Jimmy's mother, Carole (LaRita Shelby), a drug addict who spends her free time in the company of various neighborhood thugs, is depicted as incapable of raising Jimmy correctly. This denigration of the mother and/or valorization of fatherhood and male role models is a trope taken up by several entries in the ghetto action cycle including *Boyz n the Hood*, *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, *Fresh*, *Menace II Society* and *Set it Off*. In all of these films, the mother figures are too weak, too stubborn or too selfish to properly care for their sons. These female-centered households are partially to blame, these films reason, for the delinquency and/or tragedy that plagues the contemporary urban, black family. Of course, as with the silent redemption/regeneration narratives, while these 1990s ghetto action films argue that environment (including poverty, the drug trade and lack of a stable father figure) causes criminality in young black males, they also argue that in the end the individual must, as Ali urges, *choose* to reform. The film also implies that, having brought Jimmie into the world, Bobby is responsible for his criminal tendencies and therefore for his regeneration. Indeed, Ali tells Bobby it is *his* fault that his son was shot during an attempted robbery. This uneasy balance between Progressive reform, liberal environmentalism, male chauvinism and right-wing individualism also reflects the political zeitgeist of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and further reveals this film cycle's ties to

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<sup>52</sup> See Chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion of the Black Power movement and its influences on the blaxploitation cycle. Also see Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (1992) for a detailed account of the role of women in the Black Power movement.

the social problem films of the late 1930s, like *Dead End* and *Angels with Dirty Faces* (for a detailed discussion of these links, see Chapter 2).

A film like *South Central*, which focuses not so much on the individual gangsta and his struggle with society, but rather on the necessity of change and redemption for survival, would not, at first, appear to be a descendent of the gangster film. Bobby is not the typical gangster hero. He does not ask, like the protagonist of *Scarface*, for “the world and everything in it.” In fact, throughout the film Bobby only expresses a desire to survive, and later, the desire to ensure the same for his son. We do not witness any form of “rise and fall” in Bobby’s wealth or status in the ghetto, usually marked by the acquisition of a new car or home. Bobby is always relatively poor and powerless. Further straying from generic conventions, Bobby does not die or go back to jail at the film’s climax. Instead, as in *The Regeneration*, we see Bobby initially transgress social norms only to have an institution, this time the prison system rather than a settlement house, teach him the “correct” way to live his life. Thus, *South Central* builds upon and updates the traditions and lofty ambitions of the redemption/regeneration narrative, found in both mainstream, “white cast” Hollywood releases like *The Penalty* but also in independently produced black-cast race films of the 1920s, including films like *Birthright* (1924, Oscar Micheaux) and *Ten Nights in a Barroom* (1926),<sup>53</sup> which, according to Jane Gaines, were “thoroughly imbued with the spirit and letter of uplift” (107). However, as she points out, in the typical uplift narrative, “the measurement of success is always based on the distance between the one and the other...At least one character, the hapless example, must be left at the bottom, uplift’s casualty” (108). In order to show the audience just how much progress was being made by the black race, these films had to depict some members of the race as adhering to the same

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<sup>53</sup> For more on race films, see Chapter 4.

negative stereotypes that appeared in mainstream white films, like *Birth of a Nation* (1915, D.W. Griffith), a practice pitting one class against the other.

This use of the “problem class *other*” (Gaines 108), also structures the redemption/regeneration narrative found in ghetto action films like *Boyz N the Hood* and *Set it Off*. Only *Boyz N the Hood* bases this otherness not just on class, but also on sex. As numerous critics have noted,<sup>54</sup> this desire to promote responsible fatherhood sometimes borders on the misogynistic, such as when Tre’s mother, Reva (Angela Bassett), tells her ex-husband “I can’t teach him how to be a man. That’s *your* job.” The film implies that Tre only survives the ‘hood by listening to his upwardly mobile father’s sage advice whereas his solidly lower class friends, half-brothers Doughboy and Ricky, “only” have a mother to raise them and, as a result, never make it out of the ‘hood. Their violent demise is prophesized early in the film when Tre’s father, Jason “Furious” Styles (Lawrence Fishburne), tells him “Your little friends across the street don’t have anyone to show them what to do...See how they turn out.” Tre’s decision, at the last minute, to not avenge the death of his friend Ricky, is due to his father’s emotional (and physical) intervention. Tre is contrasted with Doughboy, who without the benefit of a father (he and his brother were fathered and abandoned by two different men), “chooses” to continue the ‘hood’s cycle of violence by avenging the murder of Ricky; the epilogue of the film explains that Tre goes to college in the fall and that Doughboy is killed two weeks after burying his brother. This ending, critics argue, is meant to condemn Mrs. Baker’s parenting abilities (especially in contrast with those of Furious) and by extension, the parenting abilities of single black mothers

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<sup>54</sup> See Jacquie Jones’ “The New Ghetto Aesthetic,” S. Craig Watkins’ *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema*, Michele Wallace’s “*Boyz N the Hood* and *Jungle Fever*,” Valerie Smith’s “The Documentary Impulse in Contemporary U.S. African-American Film,” etc.

in general. Here, Jacquie Jones argues “Singleton comes dangerously close to blaming Black women for the tragedies currently ransacking Black communities” (41), thus mirroring the accusations made by the infamous Moynihan Report of 1965. Like *South Central*, *Boyz N the Hood* uses the image of the father/son embrace to illustrate Tre’s “in the nick of time” decision to reject violence. These images, which mark each film’s emotional climax, rely upon viewer empathy for their effectiveness.

These redemption/regeneration-themed ghetto action films all conclude “in the nick of time.” The characters suffer, make the decision to reform, and then just barely survive their respective environments. However, as Williams and Neale have argued, such happy-endings generate tears in the viewer because “crying is a demand for satisfaction that can never be satisfied; yet tears sustain the fantasy that it can” (Williams “Melodrama” 70). The complex social issues addressed by redemption/regeneration narratives can never truly be solved by the diegesis of the film. We cry, knowing that while our protagonist might be saved “in the nick of time,” it is “too late” for many others, like Doughboy and Ricky. Our crying is a mourning for lost time, for a past that can never be recovered or altered (Williams “Melodrama” 70). For example, we expect *Fresh*, which tells the story of a resourceful 12-year-old drug dealer who facilitates the destruction of the drug lords who have plagued his neighborhood, to end on a note of hope and reassurance for the future. The protagonist reforms, clears the community of its major criminal elements, saves his older sister from a life of prostitution and is promised by the police that he and his sister will be relocated to a new, safer home. And yet, the film’s final image, before it fades to black, is a close up of Fresh crying. This is a powerful image because up until this moment Fresh has shown almost no emotion, making his outburst all the more poignant. He may have “solved” his own, individual problems, but this is not enough of a

resolution to compensate for all he has seen and experienced. This theme is established symbolically, if not somewhat heavy-handedly, through the scenes in which Fresh plays chess with his estranged father (Samuel L. Jackson) (who is, in keeping with the conventions of the redemption/regeneration narrative, is integral to Fresh's ability to survive in the ghetto). When, during one match, Fresh hesitates to put one of his pieces in peril in order to advance the long term goal of winning the game, his father warns "You're playing each piece like losing it hurts." This advice is meant to toughen Fresh to the realities of life in the ghetto, but it also serves as an extra-diegetic reminder of the price which must be paid in order to grant our protagonist his happy ending. It is therefore fitting that the film ends with our protagonist mourning what he has lost along the road to redemption.

While there may be pity, there is no mourning at the conclusions of classic gangster films like *Scarface* and *Little Caesar*; posited as hard and "masculine," classic gangster do not invite us to mourn the demise of the classic gangster hero. As a result of their classic tragic structure, in which the viewer knows ahead of time that the protagonist will die, the viewer is able to distance him/herself from the otherwise sad ending of these films. By contrast, the redemption/regeneration narrative, structured by the mode of melodrama, is characterized precisely by its last minute reversals, performed "in the nick of time." Though we might expect deaths in these films, we are never sure who will be dying or when. And this element of surprise, "the moment when agnition reduces the tension between desire and reality," is what, according to Franco Moretti, causes us to cry (Williams "Melodrama" 70). Thus another convention of the redemption/regeneration narrative is that it concludes with a profound sense of loss. Linda Williams explains "It is this feeling that something important has been lost that is crucial to

crying's relation to melodrama...Audiences may weep or not weep, but the sense of a loss that implicates readers or audiences is central" ("Melodrama" 70).

While the aforementioned ghetto action films used the figure of the responsible father as the primary agent of reform, other ghetto action films use the figure of the girlfriend as reformer. This convention of melodrama, dating back to films like *The Regeneration*, *Manhattan Melodrama* and *The Roaring Twenties*, abandons the "love triangle" narrative but retains the idea that a woman who rejects the gangster's lifestyle, his "excess," can eventually motivate him to reform. In *Menace II Society*, Caine lacks positive male figures in his life—his father is dead and his grandparents' religious proselytizing falls on deaf ears. Indeed, the film proffers this directionless upbringing as key to Caine's current criminality during an extended flashback to his childhood in the 1970s. Like Feathers in *Underworld* and Eleanor in *Manhattan Melodrama*, Ronnie (Jada Pinkett), Caine's girlfriend, is part of a long tradition of molls who reject their gangster boyfriends after realizing that they are incapable of functioning in a loving, give and take relationship. For Ronnie, the breaking point comes when her gangsta boyfriend, Pernell (Glen Plummer), is sent to jail, leaving her to take care of their son, Anthony (Jullian Roy Doster), alone. So it is not surprising that it is at Ronnie's urging that Caine finally agrees to abandon up his criminal lifestyle and leave Los Angeles for Atlanta. As they are packing their car on the day of the big move, a car full of Caine's enemies drive by, shooting at everyone in the front yard. In the final moments of the film Caine instinctively runs towards Anthony, shielding his body with his own.

As in *Underworld*, the unredeemable protagonist sacrifices himself so that the people he loves, Anthony and Ronnie, can escape and live a happy life. And as in *Underworld*, this moment of sacrifice is filmed in order to generate empathy and engagement from the

audience. After Caine is shot, we see a bird's eye shot of his jerking, dying body on the sunny pavement of his Watts neighborhood. As we hear Caine's voice over explain, "Like I said, it was funny like that in the hood sometimes. You never knew what was gonna happen. Or when. I had done too much to turn back. And I'd done too much to go on. I guess in the end, it all catches up with you," we see a montage of images from Caine's life. The shots are repeated moments from earlier in the film, each separated with a black screen. One of the few sounds we hear is of a slowing heartbeat, greatly amplified, which is timed with the appearance of the black screens in between each shot. The very images on the screen appear to "pulse" like a heart, reminding us that Caine's blood, as well as his memories, are draining out of his body. Here pathos is generated precisely by this feeling of "too late"; the sins of Caine's past outweigh his current desires for reform. His past decisions flash by his (and the audience's) eyes, reminding us that this final decision, to sacrifice himself so that the people he loves can be happy, occurs "too late" to make a difference in his own life.

*Straight Out of Brooklyn*, which tells the story of Dennis (Larry Gilliard, Jr.), a basically good teenager whose only goal, as the film's title indicates, is to get out of Brooklyn, serves as a counterexample to the aforementioned redemption/regeneration narratives found in the ghetto action cycle. As with other entries in this film cycle, Dennis' primary nemesis is his neighborhood of Red Hook; this point is emphasized through an exterior shot of Dennis' housing projects that appears throughout the film. As in *The Regeneration*, the figure of the female reformer offers up a law-abiding existence and education as the best weapons against the corruption and poverty found in the Red Hook projects. This theme is established early in the film when Dennis and his girlfriend, Shirley (Reana E. Drummond), stand along the East River, on the Brooklyn Promenade, discussing their future. The two lovers are framed in front of the

Manhattan skyline, which is both visible and yet seemingly impossible to reach. Dennis gestures towards the buildings and tells Shirley “That’s the American Dream, Shirley...That’s what my mother and father worked like dogs all their lives for.” For Dennis Manhattan is not a goal, so much as it is an antagonist, tormenting him in his cramped project apartment and his spare existence. Manhattan, Dennis believes, is his birthright, since it was “built by standing on the black man.” When Shirley explains that college is the best way for Dennis to achieve his dreams, he becomes enraged “Fuck college!...I don’t have time for that!” Thus, despite Shirley’s numerous attempts to get Dennis on the straight and narrow, he rejects her pleas and successfully executes his plan to rob the neighborhood kingpin, a decision which ultimately results in the death of both of Dennis’ parents. The film ends on a freeze frame of Dennis’s dead father as we hear the sound of Dennis and his sister screaming out their mother’s name, several blocks away, as she succumbs to the trauma sustained from one too many beatings at the hands of her husband. This image, much like that of the father/son embrace in *Boyz N the Hood* and *South Central*, provides the viewer with a powerful emotional spectacle, inviting us to cry over what is “too late.”

*Straight Out of Brooklyn* thus ponders the implications of rejecting the mentor’s advice to reform. Even *Menace II Society*, which pessimistically kills off, not just our reformed protagonist, but also his morally grounded friend, Sharif (Vonte Sweet), leaves its audience with a kernel of hope in the form of Ronnie and Anthony. However, *Straight Out of Brooklyn* ends with Dennis, orphaned and hunted by the dealer he has robbed. Here we mourn the irreversibility of time, the series of wrong decisions. Of course, once again, the protagonist’s decisions, to embrace or reject the criminal lifestyle, is not really the cause of the loss; rather their deaths are the result of a vicious cycle of ghetto poverty, institutional racism, and familial dysfunction. As

we learn earlier in the film, Dennis' father, Ray (George T. Odom) remains out of work because of the (real and perceived) racist attitudes of his employers. For this reason, he drinks and abuses his wife, physically and mentally. As a result of the welts and bruises that appear on her face on a regular basis, Dennis' mother, Frankie (Ann D. Sanders), cannot go to work. One scene opens with an exterior shot of the New York State Department of Labor. Inside a dreary office, Frankie's case worker, who refers to herself as a "friend" informs Frankie that the bruises on her face make her employers uncomfortable "I'd like to give you some advice," she tells her, "Please get some help." But Frankie counters "I don't need advice. I need my job." The case worker's solution to Frankie's domestic violence issues is to deny her work, however, the financial strain on her family is a major cause of this domestic violence. Indeed, the majority of the film highlights the role of the city, and its bureaucratic institutions, as integral to the problems experienced by the residents of Red Hook. And yet, as with the other films examined in this section, the film's final image, and its message, "First things learned are the hardest to forget. Traditions pass from one generation to the next. We need to change," locate Dennis' demise in his family and the passing on of bad behaviors within the family. The melodramatic spectacle of pathos distracts us from the more complex issues at stake in this film's depiction of the cycle of poverty and violence in the inner city.

While the ghetto action cycle is filled with references and iconography associated with the most central of gangster films, it is also informed by the melodramatic mode. These characters are constrained from getting what they want, and this overweening desire, whether it be for money (*Menace II Society*), revenge (*Boyz N the Hood*), or a stable home life (*Fresh*, *Straight Out of Brooklyn*), results in the gangsta's physical or emotional destruction. What is telling, however, about each film's choice to deploy this particular mode, is the melodrama's

ultimate inability to provide solutions to the problems it dramatizes for the audience. While the melodrama may address conflicts which lie just below the surface of consciousness, they do not work to remedy those conflicts. Rather, intense emotional spectacles, such as the embrace of father and son in the “nick of time,” work to displace the viewer’s attention from the problem at hand to the cathartic release of tears—whether these are tears of joy for what has been recuperated (the lives of Jimmy and Tre) or tears of sorrow for what has been lost (Doughboy, Ricky and Dennis). These moments of pathos allow the viewer to locate moral victory in the suffering victims of ghetto injustices, thus creating a Manichean, melodramatic solution to otherwise “persistent and deeply rooted problems.” (Williams 82).

### **1.3 CONCLUSIONS: BORDER TEXTS AND CYCLES**

This chapter had two main goals. First, using the paradigm established by the gangster film’s classic cycle, I demonstrated how and why the ghetto action cycle has been understood to be a part of that genre. However, because I based my understanding of the gangster film on one, limited model—the classic cycle—I could only account for selected elements (the gangster’s desire for material goods, the focus on the city, the fetishization of violence and guns) in selected ghetto action films (*New Jack City*, *Set it Off*, *Juice*, etc). By focusing only on a genre’s classic cycle we deny the genre’s variety and dynamism, which are a vital part of any genre’s continued ability to strike a chord with audiences. Therefore, I needed to revise my understanding of the gangster film by tossing out the commonly accepted, linear, evolutionary model of generic change in favor of one more suited to the complexities of genre formation, that is, a *cyclical* view of generic growth that accounts for why certain groups of films achieve moments of prominence

only to disappear and lie dormant for decades, appearing again only when the cultural and industrial circumstances permit it (and never in the same exact way). Thus, in the early 1930s the convergence of aforementioned factors—the Great Depression, the coming of sound, the formation of the Production Code Administration and fears and concerns over immigration—helped to bring three films with similar icons, formulas and conventions, to the forefront of the popular imagination. Without this “perfect” mix of social and industrial factors, iconic films like *Little Caesar* may have never gained the prominence they now enjoy in the history of film criticism.

I have also been arguing that privileging a genre’s classic stage leads to a limited understanding of the genre and its social function. For example, the gangster hero, when viewed through the paradigm of the classic cycle, is only understood in terms of how he successfully negotiated the contradictions inherent in the American Dream for a Depression-era audience. However, when we read the gangster hero through the paradigm of border texts, such as the redemption/regeneration cycle, we can see that he had other significant social functions: in the 1910s and 1920s the gangster also served as a symbol of the social and political goals of the contemporary Progressivist movement, namely the belief that even the most hardened and bloodthirsty of criminals, the gangster, can be moved to redemption. Thus, the paradigm of the redemption/regeneration cycle activates a another array of meanings and social connections in the broader gangster genre, meanings which were obscured by the label of “preclassical,” and which only read these films in terms of how they are similar to or different from the classic cycle. Here we can see how the use of the evolutionary model of generic change serves to shut down rather than to open up the potential meanings of a genre.

The way in which the gangster genre is usually “mapped” has proved ineffective for navigating the ever-expanding corpus of the genre. The traditional map of the gangster genre, which is arranged in concentric circles, with the classic cycle in the center, and films which deviate from this model further and further out on the borders, offers no place for films like *Boyz n the Hood* or *South Central*, films which nevertheless have been strongly associated with the gangster genre. But by granting the melodramatic cycles of the gangster film a more central place in the genre, we can better understand how certain contemporary storylines, such as Caine’s self sacrifice in *Menace II Society*, belong to a rich tradition of cinematic conventions arising out of a very specific social context. For example, Gerald Peary writes that many gangster films of the early 1930s were overt commentaries about the economic and social disenfranchisement wrought by the Great Depression. In *Born Reckless* (1930, John Ford), the gangster hero quits the rackets, attempts reformation, and yet cannot find work: “Wandering aimlessly in the belly of the city, he became an apt audience surrogate at a time of failing economy, when honesty promised no better fate than dishonesty” (Peary *Little Caesar* 12). A similar message is put forward sixty-three years later in *Menace II Society*—“going straight” does not guarantee the protagonist a happy life. Such an ending argues that there is something fundamentally wrong in a society that does not reward moral choices. In fact, the film hints that Caine might have been better off if he had remained a criminal; at the conclusion of the film, O-Dog, the ultimate affectless criminal, remains unscathed, unpunished and ready for another day of being a “menace to society.” Here we can see how recurrent social problems, such as the financial and social disenfranchisement, will generate similar narrative forms, regardless of time and place.

Abandoning the evolutionary model we can now return to the “preclassical” silent films and provide them with a more useful label, one that provides a context both for their existence and for the many films which followed in their syntactic footsteps. Likewise, taking up a cyclical model of genre study yields a much richer understanding of the social moment in which a particular film was forged—understanding *Regeneration* as part of a redemption/regeneration cycle reveals the film’s origins in the social movements of the time. This context is not, however, readily accessible if we read this film merely as a “preclassical” gangster film. This paradigm also allows for a better consideration of how films are connected across genres and historical periods and abandons the restrictions of linear generic evolution (e.g., *South Central* is best understood as a descendent of *Regeneration* rather than *Little Caesar*). Finally, by understanding the importance of the gangster genre’s neglected cycles and border texts we can see where the ghetto action cycle originated, the historical significance of its icons and conventions, and how it belongs to a rich tradition of cinematic conventions arising out of a very specific public need. In the next chapter I will further consider the links between the film cycle and public interest in a contemporary social problem.

## **2.0 THE SOCIAL PROBLEM FILM: WHERE DO CYCLES GO WHEN THEY DIE?**

“A less cautious historian...might assert flatly that the end [of the Dead End Kids cycle] has been reached, but a cinematic cycle, like the proverbial serpent, dies hard, with its remote tail flicking cynically, long after the last light has expired from its minute, reptilian brain” (Crowthers 24).

### **2.1 READING THROUGH THE PARADIGM OF THE CYCLE**

In the above quote, *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther expresses his disdain for the film, *East Side Kids* (1940, Robert F. Hill), as well as the concept of the film cycle in general by invoking the image of the serpent eating its own tail. This metaphor is apt for two reasons. First, film cycles, at least on the surface, do appear to consume themselves. The process of systemization that generates a successful film cycle is, as I will argue in this chapter, the same process that ultimately destroys it. And just as the proverbial snake does not realize that it is dead or dying, even as it continues to consume itself, the film cycle often continues to produce more and more entries long after it has overstayed its welcome with audiences. However, Crowther’s serpent metaphor is also appropriate for describing film cycles since it brings to mind several unflattering images—a dumb animal with a “minute brain,” a pest that must be eliminated, or a predator preying on the blood of its innocent victims—descriptions that could also be applied to

the film cycle. Indeed, film cycles are alternately understood as simple structures driven only by financial reward, an annoying reality of commercial filmmaking and a filmmaking practice aimed at exploiting a successful formula and wringing every last dime out of it. The goal of this chapter is not necessarily to dispute these opinions, but rather to explain how film cycles come to exist, why they proliferate so quickly and why they eventually disappear.

This chapter begins with an examination of another source of the ghetto action film, the social problem film, and more specifically, the original Dead End Kids cycle of the 1930s and 1940s,<sup>55</sup> in order to understand the origins of various elements for which the paradigm of the gangster genre cannot account. In the second half of this chapter I explore how comparing the Dead End Kids cycle with the ghetto action film offers an understanding of how cycles originate, flourish and change over time in order to remain financially viable. This comparison will allow me to dispute the commonly held belief that film cycles eventually “die” or disappear by arguing that their themes and images continue to circulate in some form, even if in a highly diluted or altered structure, decades after the original cycle has disappeared from the cultural radar. What appears as a cinematic death is, in fact, the conversion of the original content of a film cycle into an affectless cinematic cliché, available for other, seemingly incompatible generic uses, such as comedy, horror and science fiction. Comparing the Dead End Kids cycle and the ghetto action cycle will also enable me to trace how these two cycles—separated by over fifty years of film history—performed the same function—namely, to exploit various real and media-generated concerns about the contemporary plight of urban youth. Studying the ghetto action

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<sup>55</sup> Throughout the remainder of this chapter I will use the word “original” to reference the cycle of films initiated by MGM’s *Dead End* (1937, William Wyler) and continued by Warner Brothers (1938-1939). This cycle also spawned three other cycles, including Universal’s “The Dead End Kids and Little Tough Guys” (1938-1943), Monogram Studios’ “The Eastside Kids” (1940-1945) and Monogram’s later cycle “The Bowery Boys” (1946-1958). However, this chapter will only deal with the original cycle and the Eastside Kids films.

cycle through the lens of the Dead End Kids cycle reveals how, in each decade, society attempts to grapple with similar social problems and the role that film cycles play in disseminating information about these issues to a broader public. This comparison highlights how the process of cyclic evolution enacts different national projects for the social problems depicted in each film cycle; in other words, why is it that the urban youth in the Dead End Kids and ghetto action cycles eventually stop being depicted *as* social problems? How was a film like *Dead End*, a “serious” and pessimistic social problem film about the plight of post-Depression urban youth, able to launch three primarily *comic* film cycles? And how does a film like *Boyz N the Hood*, for which director, John Singleton, received a Best Director nomination, end up as the primary source material for a slew of low budget direct-to-DVD films, including two sequels to the *Leprechaun* (1993, Mark Jones) series?

### **2.1.1 A Brief History of the Social Problem Film**

Before addressing these questions it is first necessary to sketch out a definition of the social problem film since this chapter will be defining the Dead End Kids and ghetto action cycles as such. Provisionally, we can define the social problem film as any film “which combines social analysis and dramatic conflict within a coherent narrative structure. Social content is transformed into dramatic events and movie narrative adapted to accommodate social issues” (Roffman and Purdy viii). In other words, social problem films turn contemporary concerns into popular entertainment. Social problem films are “generally animated by a humane concern for the victim(s) of or crusader(s) against the social problem and, often, by an implicit assumption that the problem can be treated or even eliminated through well-intentioned liberal social reform” (Mayland 307). This social content must be timely, so that the contemporary audience recognizes

it as something that is happening “now.” If the social problem depicted is not contemporary, such as the portrayal of the 1994 Tutsis genocide in Rwanda in *Hotel Rwanda* (2004, Terry George), then the film will be viewed as “historical” since the possibility of audience intervention has passed. The issue being depicted in the social problem film must affect a significant segment of the population and it must be perceived by that significant segment of society to be a problem (Mayland 306). Studios, which are always motivated by profit, want to make films which appeal to the belief systems of their audience in order to fill more theater seats and so it makes sense that social problem films would address issues that audiences already understood as problems.<sup>56</sup> This desire to appeal to the audience’s current belief system explains why social problem films rarely conclude with any form of radical social critique<sup>57</sup> that might challenge the status quo. Indeed, these films attack problems only to “inspire limited social change or reinforce the status quo” (Roffman and Purdy viii). Social problem films are also highly dependent upon *mise en scène* (and the camera movements which reveal this *mise en scène*) more than any other cinematic element for their effect, making the setting “the ‘star’ of the show” (Ross 44).

Social problem film cycles periodically reach a peak of popularity, depending on the social, economic and political conditions of the time. Pre-WWI social problem films, for example, were first created in order to address the needs and concerns of their overwhelmingly working class audience, the audience most likely to attend the cinema and thus garner a profit for studios (Ross 19). Because this target audience was concerned with shortening their work week,

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<sup>56</sup> For example, one of the primary motivations behind Warner Brothers large output of socially conscious films in the 1930s is that the majority of their movie houses were located in the more populous Northeast (New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania) and “it could be claimed that the studio knew and needed to know more about industrial America than some its rivals” (Stead 54).

<sup>57</sup> There are exceptions to this rule. Films like *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932, Mervyn LeRoy), *Dead End* (1937, William Wyler), and *A Taste of Honey* (1961, Tony Richardson) are some examples of social problem films ending on a note of ambiguity rather than resolution.

gaining higher wages and improving work conditions, many of the social problem films of the 1910s, such as *A Corner in Wheat* (DW Griffith, 1910) and *The Lily of the Tenements* (DW Griffith, 1911), addressed these specific concerns (Ross 39, Roffman and Purdy 9). Nevertheless, while pre-WWI films were far more radical in their political views than anything that has been produced since, these films rarely critiqued the larger social system: “They condemned individual capitalists, but never capitalism. They called for reform, but denounced violence or radical solutions” (Ross 48).

After World War I, studios attempted to change the image of film going by building opulent picture palaces in both the outskirts of the nation’s cities and in the more downtown entertainment districts. These picture palaces, unlike the neighborhood storefront theaters of the 1900s and 1910s, had carpeted lobbies, plush theater seats, ornate architecture, uniformed ushers, and air-conditioning, all of which catered to the consumption needs of the burgeoning “new” middle class (i.e., white collar workers from blue collar families) (Ross 183-186). The conspicuous opulence of the picture palaces was intended to make film going a cultural experience on par with other contemporary bastions of high culture, such as the opera and the symphony. With these attempts to attract a higher social class to the cinema, the types of films that were produced also began to change in subject and theme. The character of social problem films made in the 1920s shifted from a specific focus on the concerns of working class characters to a more generalized meditation on conflicts between the working and middle to upper classes. These conflicts were ultimately resolved by either a marriage between the classes (thus implying that class differences are a social construct, not an economic reality), or the conclusion, as we see in *Saturday Night* (Cecil B. De Mille, 1922), that it is best to stick to one’s own class after all (Ross 195, Roffman and Purdy 10-11). Rather than ask for revolution or, at

the least, reform, the 1920s films increasingly moved towards an acceptance of the status quo by praising the values of the working class (asceticism, hard work, morality) while simultaneously celebrating the wealth and decorum of the upper classes (Ross 207). Although the problems encountered by working class Americans in the 1910s did not disappear in the 1920s, filmmakers no longer found it to be as profitable to address these issues on a regular basis. Here we can see how social problem films exploit prevalent social and political concerns, the needs of the target audience, and even the material conditions of film viewing.

In the 1930s a new social problem film cycle appeared, which, as in the early part of the century, touted the ideals of Progressivism, a broad based reform movement aimed to address the changes wrought by the industrial revolution. Specifically, these films addressed the movement's emphasis on social justice by examining the socioeconomic causes of criminality and the possibility of reforming those whom society had assumed were incapable of reformation. While Progressive ideals, as well as widespread interest in the plight of the working poor in America's cities waned during and after World War I, they re-emerge with the Great Depression of 1929 and the institution of the Roosevelt administration's New Deal domestic reform program in 1933. At this time audiences were more receptive to a critique of the current social order, typified by films like Mervyn LeRoy's *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932). The social problem films of the 1930s thus once again argued for a more active government that could provide for the needs of *all* of its citizens, particularly those who were presumed to be incapable of caring for themselves like children, the elderly and women. These films also addressed contemporary social concerns like widespread unemployment, the impossibility of the American Dream (which had seemed at least somewhat possible prior to the Great Depression), immigration and the post-Depression increase in orphaned and/or delinquent children (Roffman

and Purdy 81). The latter would become the subject of a major cycle of the late 1930s, the Dead End Kids cycle, and a topic that would continue to be addressed throughout film history, leading up to the creation of the ghetto action cycle in the 1990s.

### 2.1.2 Identifying a Shared Semantics

Before I can address how the comparison between these two cycles illuminates how cycles grow and change over time, it is first necessary to explain why I have chosen to compare these two film cycles in the first place. Certainly, comparing the ghetto action cycle with virtually any film cycle, such as the Andy Hardy cycle (*Love Finds Andy Hardy* [1938, George B. Seitz], *Andy Hardy Gets Spring Fever* [1939, W.S. Van Dyke]) or the disaster film cycle of the 1970s (*Poseidon Adventure* [1972, Ronald Neame], *Towering Inferno* [1974, John Guillermin and Irwin Allen], etc.), would allow me to formulate a theory of cycle evolution. However, I have chosen the Dead End Kids cycle as an object of comparison since its imagery and themes endure a transformation similar to what happens to the imagery and themes found in the ghetto action cycle. This should not be surprising since the gangstas of the ghetto action film are, in many ways, the Dead End Kids of the 1990s. They are the troubled youth whom we both pity and fear, whom we want to reform *and* lock up. The most apparent similarity between the original Dead End Kids cycle and the ghetto action cycle is the attempt to depict, in as much detail as possible, the lives of young, impoverished males living in city slums. Other important similarities between the two cycles include: an overtly stated social message which stalls the narrative's forward movement (or what I am calling a "message with a capital M"); a negative view of figures of authority, "high" society and dominant society in general; the use of an identifiable or specialized urban slang; an emphasis on "bricolage"; and a binary syntax which blames both the

socioeconomic environment *and* the juvenile delinquent's inherently "bad" nature for his current plight.

The most logical place to begin a discussion of the original Dead Ends Kids cycle is with *Dead End* (1937, William Wyler), the first entry in the cycle and a central text in the corpus of the 1930s social problem film. *Dead End*, which is adapted from Sidney Kingsley's successful Broadway play (1935) of the same name, focuses on the necessity of a good environment, including education, religion, and strong role models, for the creation of a model citizen. The film offers two possible outcomes for the children living on the crowded city block which dead ends in the dirty East River: become an upstanding (but poor) member of the community like Dave Connell (Joel McCrea) or turn into a hardened (but wealthy) gangster like Baby Face Martin (Humphrey Bogart), whose own mother slaps him when he attempts to visit her. The film asks: will these as yet harmless juvenile delinquents grow up to be like Dave or like Baby Face? *Dead End* provides an ambiguous answer to this question: In the last moments of the film, Tommy (Billy Halop), charged with assault, is on his way to juvenile court to find out if he will be sent to reform school (which, according to the film's logic and the logic of contemporary social problem films, would guarantee Tommy a future in crime) or be allowed to leave the dead end with his sister in favor of a safer, more stable environment.

As I mentioned, the *mise en scène* is key to any social problem film and *Dead End*, although shot entirely on a studio-constructed set, has a painstakingly detailed setting. The film's opening image begins with dramatic zoom into a close up of a "Dead End" sign, marking where the dirty city block meets the equally dirty East River. The camera movement calls our attention to the film's title while also setting up the fatalistic narrative of the film to follow—the people who live at this location are a literal and metaphoric dead end. After the credits run, the

“Dead End” sign dissolves into an extreme long shot of New York City’s skyline over which runs text detailing a brief history of how the area is being slowly gentrified. The statement, “And now the terraces of these great apartment houses look down into the windows of the tenement poor,” immediately sets up one of the film’s central oppositions, between the haves and the have-nots. Opening with this explanatory, socially conscious statement, otherwise known as a “square up,”<sup>58</sup> establishes the film’s basis in real, contemporary issues (Schaefer *Bold!* 69). This square up signals *Dead End*’s “message with a capital M,” and calls attention to the film’s lofty ambition to be something more than mere entertainment—it also wishes to *educate* the audience. The camera then makes its descent down from the tops of the skyscrapers into the shadowy depths of the dead end’s tenements, as if to mimic the perspective of the rich tenants who gaze down into the ghetto from the safe vantage point of their opulent apartments. This opening take, which is quite lengthy (eighty-two seconds) reveals the semantics of urban poverty: laundry drying on lines strung from window to window, tenants sleeping on fire escapes to cool off from the hot summer night, garbage cans leaning against grimy brick walls, mangy, stray dogs, and a homeless man sleeping on a bench. This long take then cuts to an extreme low angle shot of the high rise that has been built next to the slums, signaling the early stages of gentrification.

*Dead End*’s dramatic opening is mimicked in many ways by the opening of *Boyz N the Hood* (1991, John Singleton), the first entry in the ghetto action cycle, not because Singleton is directly referencing *Dead End* but rather, because such an opening has become standard in social problem films about urban youth. The main difference between these two openings is that *Boyz N the Hood* reverses *Dead End*’s pattern by first opening with a square up: “One out of every 21 Black American males will be killed in their lifetime. Most will die at the

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<sup>58</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the square up and its function in films which toe the line between education and titillation, see Chapter 3.

hands of another Black male.” This statement balances education and titillation by grounding the film in contemporary social issues but also justifying the (violent, criminal) content of the film we are about to see. The camera then cuts from the black screen listing these statistics and zooms into a close up of a bright red “Stop” sign. In both *Dead End* and *Boyz N the Hood* this sudden camera movement is asking the viewer to “stop” and pay attention to what the camera, freed from its traditional function of merely driving the plot forward, is pointing out. In *Boyz N the Hood* the “Stop” sign appears just after the credit sequence, during which we hear the sounds of what is most likely a drive by shooting. Thus, the dramatic camera movement leading our eyes to the sign is a moment of direct address; Singleton is asking for a “Stop” to the violence we have just heard.<sup>59</sup> This overt emphasis on signage is a recurring semantic element in social problem films, the ghetto action cycle, and most films attempting to create a convincing portrait of urban life (Hallam and Marshment 119).

Throughout *Dead End*, *Boyz N the Hood*, and the films of their respective cycles, the camera is our omniscient tour guide through the inner city. Indeed, *Dead End*’s use of independent camera movement and unmotivated changes in camera angles (particularly the shift from normal to extreme high and low angles) pulls us out of the film’s seamless narrative spell long enough to make us aware that we are watching a film. These moments of independent camera movement do not appear frequently in the film; rather their effect comes from appearing at specific, privileged moments, and therefore stand out as communicating a message to the audience. They draw our attention to the fact that the film, *as* a social problem film, is delivering a message (Cormack 137). For example, early in *Dead End*, Kay (Wendy Barrie), a former

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<sup>59</sup> This moment could also point the status of this neighborhood as a “stopping” point or “dead end” for its residents, thus illuminating another parallel between *Dead End* and *Boyz N the Hood*. I thank Dr. Lucy Fischer for pointing out this similarity.

tenement resident who has “upgraded” her lot to the status of a kept woman, goes to visit Dave, her sometime beau, in his shabby apartment building. The use of low-key lighting and extreme low and high angle shots gives the viewer Kay’s horrified perspective on the dingy building, a reminder of where she has been and where she could end up again. But then the camera takes on a volition of its own; as Kay walks up the steps the camera stops, even as she continues to walk, in order to let a garbage man pass by on the rickety, narrow steps. As Kay turns a corner, the camera tilts up sharply to reveal cockroaches crawling over a garbage can. At these moments the camera becomes detached from its role of forwarding the narrative and instead takes on an active role, “showing” Kay and the viewer how bad life can be in the dead end. This use of digressive camera movements is similar to those found in Italian Neorealist films, which aim, not just to “show” the viewer what is happening, but also to *analyze* it for them.<sup>60</sup>

In this way, the camera movement of the social problem film profoundly shapes how we feel about the characters and their surroundings. *Menace II Society* (1993, Allen and Albert Hughes) also allows the camera to stray from the main action. In the film’s opening, for example, Caine and O-Dog flee the scene of a double murder (committed by O-Dog) in a convenience store, but the camera remains behind for many seconds, lingering on a shot of the empty doorway, as if it is pondering Caine’s amoral choice to stick by his murdering friend rather than to call the police. The viewer does not flee the scene with Caine, we must instead absorb the aftermath of O-Dog’s violent act. In these two social problem film cycles, independent camera movement and *mise en scène* are strongly tied to both the film’s realism and its social message. These moments, when *mise en scène* becomes important in and of itself, are tied to the film’s goal of creating an impression of realism: “For realism to become foregrounded

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<sup>60</sup> Thank you to Dr. Neepa Majumdar, who pointed this out.

as visual spectacle, there have to be iconographic elements which center attention on the performance of realism as a signifying value” (Hallam and Marshment 117). In the ghetto action film, *Fresh* (1994, Boaz Yakin), for example, the camera frequently cuts from framing its characters in medium shots to long shots (while most classical Hollywood films move from long shots to medium shots), in order to reveal more of the urban *mise en scène* surrounding them and to locate them within their overpowering urban wasteland. The camera also films characters through bars, chain link fences and other barriers, in order to convey the feeling of entrapment experienced by the film’s protagonist as he longs for an escape from the city. Social commentary is so overt in the ghetto action cycle that one of the cycle’s parodies, *Don’t Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* (1996, Paris Barclay), turns the convention into a running joke. When the narrator, Ashtray (Shawn Wayans) explains the difficulties of growing up in the ‘hood with no positive male role models, the film’s director, Keenan Ivory Wayans, who appears in the shot as a mailman, stops delivering the mail, looks directly at the camera and yells “Message!” These moments, while intended to be humorous, also illuminate how the social problem film’s didactic structure momentarily pulls the viewer out of the diegesis, and how these moments can, at times, feel heavy handed or out of place.

Beyond the use of extended establishing shots and independent camera movements which point out specific details of the *mise en scène*, the Dead End Kids and ghetto action cycles provide information about their characters simply through their ability (or inability) to master their city surroundings. The Darwinian logic of the social problem film often portrays those characters that are most able to adapt to their environments as the most likely to succeed in them. In *Little Tough Guy* (1938, Harold Young), the first entry in Universal’s “The Dead End Kids and Little Tough Guys” spin-off cycle, Johnny (Billy Halop) is pushed around and

threatened by the Dead End Kids when he and his family are obligated to move from their upwardly mobile middle class neighborhood to a working class neighborhood with a higher crime rate. Johnny only proves his worth to the gang and becomes their leader when he is able to defend his turf with a well-aimed punch. Johnny is rewarded for learning that the key to survival in the streets is tough talk and violent action. This Social Darwinism also extends to the boys' ability to manipulate and master their environment in order find food, shelter and money. In *Dead End*, for example, the boys cool off in the polluted East River and when they are hungry they steal potatoes and roast them over a back alley garbage can, while in *Crime School* (1938, Lewis Seiler) the Dead End Kids steal items off the street such as tires, bicycles and even a bathtub, so they can pawn them for money. This ability to maneuver through and make use of a dangerous urban landscape is also a central convention of the ghetto action film cycle of the 1990s. The youth in these films, much like the Dead End Kids, literally live off of what the streets provide. Characters sell drugs, eliminate rivals and steal what they need in and from the urban milieu. During one scene in *Menace II Society*, for example, Caine explains in a voice over that he wants new rims for the tires of a convertible he has just stolen: "I needed some rims bad. And I knew just how to get 'em. And I sure as hell wasn't gonna pay for 'em." We then see an aerial shot of Caine in his new car as another vehicle pulls up alongside him—his new rims have arrived. In the next shot we see the driver of the car, who is listening to music and clearly distracted; in other words, he is the perfect mark. Caine's gaze moves from the driver, across his dashboard and down to the shiny gold rims on his wheels. During this long take the sound of an airplane taking off or landing overwhelms the diegetic sounds of rap music coming from the stranger's car, perhaps signaling Caine's thought process, how he calculates the risk and arrives

at a decision about whether or not to steal something. Here we get the impression that everything on the street is ripe for the taking, as long as you are stronger and quicker than your opponent.

This ability to navigate through the city is also related to each cycle's reliance on "bricolage" to construct an aura of realism and naturalism. The term bricolage, taken from the work of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (who coined the term), means "tinkering" and refers to how "primitive man makes use of the materials at hand which may not bear any relationship to the intended project but appears to be all he has to work with" (Feuer 4). Jane Feuer has argued that the use of bricolage in the integrated musical, such as when an actor incorporates everyday objects that happen to be lying around, such as a broom or an umbrella, into his/her dance number, creates a feeling of "utter spontaneity" and aids in bridging the gap between audience and performer (3-5). The singer/dancer's performance, which is highly engineered (involving the work of the songwriters, composers, musicians, choreographers, directors and actors), appears to arise "naturally" out of the *mise en scène*. Thus the use of bricolage, in the context of the integrated musical, allows us to believe in "everydayness" of the characters on screen. We believe, for example, that Gene Kelly is just a regular guy swept away by his passions when he performs in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952, Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly), rather than a meticulous task master, who rehearsed his seemingly impromptu dance numbers over and over until exhaustion.<sup>61</sup>

Bricolage occurs in the social problem film when characters "tinker" with objects in the *mise en scène* which were not intended to be used for their current purposes (but which are all the characters have to work with, given their limited financial situations). By deploying this term in the context of the social problem film, I am returning it, partially, to its anthropological

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<sup>61</sup> One rumor is that Debbie Reynolds, who played Kelly's love interest in the film, practiced the number "Good Morning" until the blood vessels in her feet burst ("*Singin' in the Rain*").

origins. In other words, characters in social problem films find themselves in restricted economic situations in which they are forced to put objects at hand to use in service of another purpose, such as the conversion of an old metal garbage can into a makeshift stove in *Dead End*.

However, Feuer's redefinition of this term, as a practice which lends a feeling of naturalness or realism to the musical number, illuminates the ultimate effect of bricolage in the social problem film. When characters in social problem films resourcefully make use of the random refuse of their urban landscape—turning trash into treasure, so to speak—it lends a sense of realism to the scene. As in the highly engineered musical number which strives to bridge the gap between audience and performer by making song and dance performances appear unrehearsed and spontaneous, the social problem relies on the audience's belief in its realism for its ultimate effect. As Feuer explains "Bricolage and engineering—at first glance, antitheses—become instead twin images of a paradox, for in Hollywood studio film it takes engineering to give an effect of tinkering" (6). If audiences do not believe, for example, that Angel (Bobby Jordan) is poor, hungry and destitute in *Dead End*, then we will not feel sympathy for him. But the social problem film's reliance on bricolage—including the fact that Angel uses an old rope as a belt—adds to the feeling of realism that *Dead End* aims to establish. We get the impression that the character of Angel was not fabricated for the film, that this is what a street urchin would probably do if he did not own a real belt.

Bricolage is yet another way for the audience to distinguish between official society, with its goal-directed, engineers whose "tasks are subordinated to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purposes of the project" (Feuer 5), and the street urchin, who must rely on his resourcefulness and quick wits to survive in the modern city. For example, in *Ghosts on the Loose* (1943, William Beaudine), an entry in Monogram's

Eastside Kids cycle, the kids are in charge of finding decorations for Glimpy's (Huntz Hall) sister's wedding. Since the boys are perpetually broke they "borrow" their wedding tuxedos and a gaudy flower arrangement (intended for the funeral of a high profile gangster) from a local mortuary. Here the boys are "tinkering," taking objects intended for one purpose and using them for another (highlighted when Muggs [Leo Gorcey] calls the funeral-turned-wedding flower arrangement "classy" as he removes its "RIP" sign). Similarly, in *They Made Me a Criminal* (1939, Busby Berkeley) the Dead End Kids use a water tower as an impromptu pool on a hot day. The same technique is employed in the ghetto action cycle for analogous purposes. In *South Central* (1992, Steve Anderson) Jimmie (Christian Coleman) and his friends convert old car seats in the dump into lounge chairs, while in *Fresh* the title character uses an abandoned rail yard near his Brooklyn home as a secret "bank" for the money he makes running drugs. These instances of bricolage feel as if they have not been specifically constructed for the film viewer. Rather, the seemingly natural way in which characters use these objects gives us a sense that these moments are "realistic," that turning a garbage can into a stove or a car seat into a couch is what street urchins *must* do in dire circumstances. Much as the viewer admires Gene Kelly's ability to seamlessly incorporate the objects he finds around him into his dance, s/he is likewise impressed by the resourcefulness of these urban youth but also saddened by how their extreme living situations mandates this resourcefulness for survival.

In these two cycles the ineptitude of middle to upper class serves to further highlight the juvenile delinquent's mastery of his urban landscape and his poverty. In *Dead End* the upper class tenants of the towering apartment building which overlooks the slums are acutely uncomfortable when informed that, because of the construction being performed on the front of their building, they will need to enter and exit through the alley. As a result of this new

arrangement, which forces the formerly segregated classes to mingle, Phillip Griswald (Charles Peck), an upper class boy, is lured away from the safety of his apartment building, beaten and robbed. And in *They Made Me a Criminal* the Dead End Kids spot a wealthy young boy sitting alone in a fancy car. The Kids, who know an easy target when they see and hear it (the boy's diction reveals his boarding school education), convince the boy to enter a poker game during which he is robbed of his clothing and possessions. Similarly, in the ghetto action cycle white, upper- and middle class characters are shown visiting the 'hood only when they are engaged in unsavory business. For example, in *Menace II Society* a simpering, bespectacled white man is involved in an insurance scam that entails having Caine and his friends steal a car. When the man appears hesitant about returning to the same neighborhood that evening to pick up his car, Caine's friend points out the man's hypocrisy "What, you afraid to come 'round this neighborhood at night mutha fucka? Get your white bread ass on back to Brentwood where you belong." In *Fresh* and *Clockers* (1995, Spike Lee) white, upper- and middle class characters drive into the 'hood (in Mercedes and BMWs) only when they need to buy drugs. These characters are too scared of the ghetto's residents to leave their cars and yet they are dependent upon them to satisfy their drug addictions. In both cycles, these moments are used to reveal the helplessness, hypocrisy and excess of the wealthier circles of society and throw our sympathy more towards the juvenile delinquents.

In both cycles this emphasis on a character's ability (or lack thereof) to successfully navigate the city landscape is especially apparent in the way representatives of "official society," like police officers and social workers, are depicted. In *Neath Brooklyn Bridge* (1942, Wallace Fox), which is part of Monogram's Eastside Kids series, the boys, despite their lack of formal educations and propensity towards goofing off, are able to clear Danny's

(Bobby Jordan) name of false murder charges and to catch the real killers in the act of committing a new crime, all while protecting the stepdaughter of the murdered man. The police are only necessary when the time comes to slap on the hand cuffs. Not surprisingly, the boys make cracks about the ineptitude of the police throughout the film. In fact, a recurring plot in the Dead End Kids cycle and its offshoots is a character who is either wrongly accused of a crime (*Neath Brooklyn Bridge*, *Little Tough Guy* [1938, Harold Young], *Angels Wash Their Faces* [1939, Ray Enright], *They Made Me a Criminal*, *Ghosts on the Loose* [1943, William Beaudine]) or whose punishment far exceeds the crime committed (*Dead End*, *Crime School*, *Hell's Kitchen* [1939, Lewis Seiler]), creating the impression that the police and the judicial system are not to be trusted to properly uphold society's laws. In the ghetto action cycle, police ineptitude and corruption are likewise accepted as a matter of course; it is rare to find a police officer in any of these films who is not sadistic, racist or "on the take." Even those police officers or government representatives who are depicted as well-meaning and upright (in *New Jack City* [1991, Mario Van Peebles], *Set it Off* [1996, F. Gary Gray] and *Clockers*, etc.), inevitably make things worse for the very people they are trying to help. For example, in *New Jack City*, Detective Scotty Appleton (Ice-T) reforms crack addict Pookie (Chris Rock) and helps him to get clean. As a measure of his gratitude, Pookie asks if he can go undercover to help bring down crack kingpin Nino Brown (Wesley Snipes). Scotty, however, misjudges Pookie's abilities to resist the daily temptations of working undercover in a crack factory, which leads to his eventual downfall and murder. And in both *Menace II Society* and *Boyz N the Hood*, the only role played by police officers is that of racists, bullies and intimidators. In both cycles these narratives highlight the inability of "official society," like policemen, judges and even well meaning social workers, to effectively protect the inhabitants of the cinematic ghetto.

The Dead End Kids cycle and the ghetto action cycle also share a similar cast of down on their luck protagonists. In both cycles these protagonists are working class males, ranging in age from adolescence to early twenties, who are raised by “alternative,” abusive or nonexistent families. In *Dead End* the intentionally adorable Angel tells the gang about the severe beating he and his mother received from his drunken father the previous evening. Angel’s nonchalant account of these events and the other boys’ blasé responses—they interrupt at one point to heckle a passerby—indicates that such parental behavior is commonplace and accepted in the dead end. As a result, in the context of the Dead End Kids cycle and its various spin-offs, the best parents are those adults *without* children. In fact, in several films in the original cycle (*Dead End*, *Crime School*, *Little Tough Guy*) Billy Halop’s character is portrayed as having the most promise out of all of the boys because he is an orphan raised by an educated, responsible, upwardly mobile, older sister. The other boys, whose parents are rarely seen or even mentioned (we often get the feeling that the boys were conceived by the city itself, a parent that feeds and clothes them), find parental figures in Tommy’s sister, her well-intentioned, upwardly mobile suitors, and neighborhood do-gooders who, unlike everyone else in town, have *some* faith in the Kids. To cite one example, in *The East Side Kids*, the first entry in Monogram’s Eastside Kids cycle, the only boy with a visible family member is Danny (Harris Berger), and that family member has been charged with murder. Therefore the boys turn to a local cop, Pat O’Day (Leon Ames) as a pseudo father figure, who effectively steers them away from crime by building them a boys’ club.

Similarly, in the ghetto action cycle, parenting (or lack thereof) becomes a central part of the socioeconomic explanation for why the protagonists have turned to a life of crime. Often characters are orphans or abandoned children being raised by their grandparents (*Menace*

*II Society, Juice* [1992, Ernest R. Dickerson]), aunts (*Fresh*) or siblings (*Set it Off*). As with the Dead End Kids cycle, the characters who are being raised by their biological parents often have as many, if not more, problems than their orphaned or abandoned peers. For instance, in *Boyz n the Hood*, single mothers like Brenda Baker (Tyra Ferrell) are depicted as clichéd “welfare queens” who alternately view their children as meal tickets or burdens. The first time we see Mrs. Baker she is sitting on her plastic-coated couch (a metaphor for the lack of warmth in her home), telling her adolescent son, Doughboy “You ain’t shit. You just like your daddy. You don’t do shit, and you never gonna amount to shit.” Throughout the film Mrs. Baker is often filmed in repose, smoking a cigarette. We never see her at work or mention a job, leading the viewer to believe that she is most likely on welfare. Thus, critics argue, when her other son, Ricky (Morris Chestnut), is shot down at the film’s climax and the film’s epilogue indicates that Doughboy (Ice Cube) will be killed soon thereafter, while Tre (Cuba Gooding Jr.) goes off to college, the viewer is meant to condemn Mrs. Baker’s parenting abilities. In *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991, Matty Rich), the film’s protagonist, Dennis (Larry Gilliard, Jr.), is plagued by his father’s unending cycle of alcoholism, depression and domestic abuse and the film’s opening immediately establishes these socioeconomic causes of deviancy. The film opens with a slow pan of a Brooklyn housing project. The next shot places us inside the projects, with a close up of a calendar displaying the painted image of three young black boys. The caption under this reads “Visions of our Youth.” It is at this point that we can begin to detect the sounds of a man yelling, a woman pleading and dishes breaking. But the camera continues its movement, panning across the wall of the room, which is bare except for some fading wallpaper. Eventually the camera finds two stuffed animals perched atop a dresser. With this simple, digressive long take we learn some key information—that this room belongs to an African American child and that the child’s

family is destitute and troubled (evidenced by the bare bedroom and offscreen fighting). The camera then tilts downward to reveal a girl, sleeping on the floor and tracks to the side to reveal a boy, Dennis, who is wide awake and listening to the argument in the other room with a scowl. When the camera finally exits this dark room we become a witness to the previously unseen violent argument: Dennis' father (George T. Odom) rages at his wife (Ann D. Sanders), throwing dishes and raising his hands to her face, which already bear the scars of previous beatings. These beatings as well as the violent and depressing atmosphere of the Red Hook projects are implicitly blamed for Dennis' ultimate, deadly decision to steal money from a local kingpin.

In addition to having similar childhood experiences (extreme poverty, lack of positive adult role models, exposure to violence and drugs at an early age), the characters populating these two social problem film cycles share many personality traits. First, in both cycles, the boys are almost always part of a gang because this membership affords them power and strength in the ghetto, as well as a surrogate family (to take the place of their dysfunctional families). Their inclusion in this specific subculture<sup>62</sup> is marked by their clothing and diction. In the original *Dead End Kids* cycle, clothing is primarily a reflection of socioeconomic circumstances (as opposed to a definitive fashion choice). The boys wear jeans or khakis, always stained and ripped, with undershirts or sweaters. Often their clothing is far too big for them, pointing to their origins as hand-me-downs or Salvation Army rags. Pants, their bottoms stained with dirt and grease from being dragged along the ground, are held up with makeshift belts. During the course of a *Dead End Kids* movie this clothing might be contrasted with that of a wealthy boy of the same age (*Dead End*, *Little Tough Guy*, *'Neath Brooklyn Bridge*, *Eastside Kids*), who is dressed in either a suit, a private school uniform, or a starched, button-down shirt

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<sup>62</sup> For a discussion of the ghetto action cycle's relationship with subcultures, see Chapter 3.

and dress pants. Occasionally, when the boys are shown to be making some money (*Little Tough Guy*, *Clancy Street Boys* [1943, William Beaudine]), they acquire gaudy zoot suits and wide brimmed hats in imitation of the *nouveau riche* gangsters they see around the neighborhood.

The protagonists of the ghetto action film also wear clothing that marks them as part of a specific subculture. One major difference from the Dead End Kids' wardrobe, however, is that no matter how poor or destitute, these characters almost never appear in ragged or dirty clothing. Rather the adolescent characters in ghetto action films spend most of their available money on their appearances, which includes hair cuts, clothing, sneakers, jewelry and cars. A sharp new hair cut (*Boyz N the Hood*), a coordinated outfit (*Juice*) or a brand new set of wheels (*Menace II Society*), are highlighted as significant to the ghetto action character's identity. To be seen in dirty, ripped undershirt would be a mark of shame, indicating that a character, like the iconic crack addicts who reside in films like *New Jack City*, *Boyz N the Hood*, *Menace II Society* and *Fresh*, has hit "rock bottom." Nevertheless, in both film cycles these costuming choices, though very different, highlight the boys' inclusion in a specific socioeconomic group at a particular period of time: to wear dirty undershirts and stained khakis is to be a working class juvenile in the late 1930s and 1940s and to wear baggy jeans, white sneakers, and gold jewelry is to be a working class or lower-middle-class African American teenager in the early 1990s.

The characters of the Dead End Kids and ghetto action cycles are also marked by their diction and their use of a specific jargon. In the former, the use of a specialized dialect indicates the boys' socioeconomic status and education. Most of the gang, particularly Leo Gorcey and Huntz Hall (since they are more caricatured than the other Dead End Kids) speak

with a heavy Brooklyn accent<sup>63</sup> which is utilized primarily for comic effect in later films in the cycle. For instance, in *Clancy Street Boys*, part of Monogram's Eastside Kids cycle, the gang celebrates Muggs' eighteenth birthday by giving him a cake and candles. The sign stuck into the top of the cake reads "Hapy Boithday." After Muggs is presented with his birthday cake the gang demands a speech. When he struggles to find the right words he admits, sheepishly "I ignored my vocabulation as a kid." Indeed, a running gag throughout the entire series are the boys' malapropisms, usually uttered by Huntz Hall and greeted with smack by Leo Gorcey. The slang the boys use, including terms like "mugs", "dames", "finn", and "coppers", is not, however, idiosyncratic to the Dead End Kids. Rather, this slang can be found in any 1930s film attempting to depict life in the contemporary city slums. Hence, the Dead End Kids were not considered to be a part of a general youth subculture (such a concept did not exist in the 1930s), just as youthful members of the slum's subculture. By contrast, in the ghetto action film, the boys' diction and slang highlights their socioeconomic status and education level, but also points to their participation in a particular youth subculture. This shared dialect is rooted in hip hop culture, specifically rap music, which enables it to be shared across a large adolescent audience. The use of this slang (both as a speaker and a listener) points to the boys' inclusion in a subculture, namely urban youth (though, as I will address in the next chapter, by the early to mid-1990s many of these words were adopted by individuals *outside* of this subculture, such as white suburban teens). The slang used in this cycle is usually tied to the world of hustling: a character pushes "rocks" or "chronic," "smokes" his enemies (also known as a "187"), all while keeping a look out for the "five o" or the "popo." It has been argued that what is significant about the use of slang points not so much to what is being said, but way in which it is said; in

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<sup>63</sup> "Whaddy" instead of "What do you...", "Mudder" for "Mother," "poifect" for "perfect," "moider" for "murder," etc.

this case, the medium is the message: “Slang serves the important function of identifying other young people as members of a group; because you use certain words or expressions, I know that we are from the same tribe and that I can speak freely and informally with you” (Dalzell xii). In the context of these two film cycles, the use of slang also highlights the Otherness of the characters—their difference from the mainstream middle class.

Clearly, one major difference between the semantics of the Dead End Kids cycle and the ghetto action cycle is the race<sup>64</sup> of the films’ protagonists. The characters of the original Dead End Kids cycle are all Caucasian and of ambiguous ethnic backgrounds (since we are usually only provided with their first names). The Dead End Kids are certainly working class and, with their thick Brooklyn accents, are marked as “lower class” products of the modern city, but they are, nevertheless, white. This fact is important because, as I will argue in the second half of this chapter, the Dead End Kids, who begin as unassimilable working class delinquents, are eventually transformed, via their repetition throughout the cycle, into responsible, patriotic citizens, willing to join in the nation’s war effort. The essentially “unsolvable” social problems of the original cycle are “solved” in its later incarnations. Only one character, who first appears in Monogram’s Eastside Kids cycle, is black. Later in the chapter I will discuss how this particular character, Scruno (“Sunshine” Sammy Morrison), who is frequently the butt of racial jokes, functions as a way to contain the issues of race which never become an *issue* in a cycle purporting to deal with contemporary social problems in the nation’s cities. By making Scruno’s status as a black character nothing more than a flimsy cliché, the cycle is able to give a nod to

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<sup>64</sup> I will not be foregrounding the issue of race in this chapter because the paradigm of the Dead End Kids, while it certainly does illuminate issues of race, is more useful for exploring how class, youth and criminality are deployed in each cycle and their relationship with social problems. Chapter 4, which analyzes the ghetto action cycle through the paradigm of the blaxploitation cycle, will, however, be devoted exclusively to a discussion of race and how it is marketed and represented in each cycle.

contemporary American city's racial diversity without having to delve into the thorny topic of race relations.

By contrast, all of the protagonists in the ghetto action cycle are black and the majority of the conflicts experienced by these characters are tied to both their racial background and class status. Race is not a surface distraction, an opportunity for sight gags and off-color humor as it is with the Dead End Kids, but rather the primary catalyst for what happens to the characters in the films. Thus, when comparing these two cycles we can see how, unlike the Dead End Kids cycle, the protagonists of the ghetto action cycle are never wrapped back into the national fold as patriots and soldiers. There is no good war to fight in the 1990s and so concerns over the figure of the black juvenile delinquent cannot be transferred onto the menacing cinematic image of the Nazi or Japanese saboteur as they were during the reign of the Dead End Kids cycle and its spin-offs. The performance of clichés within the ghetto action cycle thus enacts a different project, that is, to detach images of race, poverty and destitution from the syntax of the social problem film. Once they become images rooted in previous images from the cycle (as opposed to images rooted in real life), the semantics of the ghetto action film are relieved of the burden of making some kind of social commentary; these “unburdened” images are then free to make money for studios by attaching to the syntax of the comedy, horror film, even the Western. Furthermore, while the images of the Dead End Kids ceased to connote difference from the mainstream American once they became patriots and soldiers, thus extending their financial viability, the images of the ghetto action cycle had to *maintain* their racial, social and economic difference in order to generate a profit. Again I will discuss this difference in detail in the second half of this chapter.

### 2.1.3 Tying Semantics to Syntax

In both the Dead End Kids and ghetto action cycles the aforementioned semantic elements, such as the independent camera, a focus on *mise en scène* and the use of slang, are tied to a consistent syntax—the belief that criminality is rooted in the environment in which an individual is raised. This belief, stemming from the ideology of the Progressive movement of the 1910s, maintains that criminals are not born but made. The most salient semantic element of both film cycles, their focus on *mise en scène*, is primarily intended to show the viewer how and why these characters became juvenile delinquents in the first place. As I argued in Chapter 1, this emphasis on an environmental-based explanation for criminal behavior dates back to the silent “melodramatic” gangster and social problem films of the 1910s and 1920s and is used to create empathy for characters who commit despicable acts. The classic cycle of the gangster film veers away from this approach to criminality for the very same reason. The Production Code Administration, which came into its own during the height of the classic gangster cycle’s popularity (approximately 1933-34), decreed that “Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation” (qtd in Vieira 217). The gangster film, in an effort to gain the PCA’s seal of approval (without which films would suffer at the box office), did not attempt to provide a reason for the gangster’s criminality, other than greed and a competitive spirit; to argue that the gangster turned to crime because he was raised in poverty would create empathy for his depraved point of view, and, much worse, it would imply that the American Dream was somehow flawed.

While the sentimentalized criminal hero, who is depicted as turning to crime as the only way to make ends meet in an antagonistic urban milieu, would not reappear onscreen until the mid to late 1940s in *films noir* like *Force of Evil* (1948, Abraham Polonsky), the PCA

did not seem to mind if the criminal being sentimentalized was a juvenile. As I will argue in more detail in the Chapter 3, although the newly emerging concepts of the teenager and the juvenile delinquent did not gain a firm foothold in the American public imagination until after World War II, this heightened interest in youth and criminality was nevertheless brewing in the years leading up to the war. These concerns met head on with the Progressivist impulses of the New Deal era in the Dead End Kids cycle, creating a doubled perspective on the post-Depression street urchin. On the one hand is the “nurture” side of the nature/nurture debate, which argues that the juvenile delinquent cannot help his criminality because the city has brutalized him to the point that he must turn to a criminal lifestyle in order to survive. At the same time these films also promote the nature side—that the juvenile delinquent, no matter how brutalized, always has the ability to *choose* a moral life supporting the needs of the status quo. Therefore in these social problem films the juvenile delinquent is both fated and utterly free.

The semantics of the Dead End Kids cycle supports this dual syntax. For example, the cycle’s fetishistic attention to *mise en scène* (the garbage on the streets, the small, dingy apartments, the boys’ ripped T-shirts and thick, working class accents) demands that the audience take these factors into account before judging the behavior of the juvenile delinquents on screen. The use of a “message with a capital M,” conveyed through a digressive moment in which the camera focuses on a detail unnecessary to forwarding the film’s plot, or, even more explicitly, through a character’s monologue, also provides explanation and context for the delinquent’s choices. For example, at one point in *Dead End*, Dave makes an impassioned speech about the Dead End Kids, “They gotta fight for a place to play, fight for the likes of something to eat, fight for everything... ‘Enemies of Society,’ it says in the papers. Why not? What have they got to be so friendly about?” This idea, whether spoken, acted out, or conveyed

via cinematography, appears in a slightly varied form in numerous other films of the Dead End Kids cycle. In *Crime School*, for example, a juvenile court judge asks each of the boys about why their parents are not present, a device alerting the audience to their impoverished childhoods: Frankie (Bill Halop) says he is an orphan raised by his older sister; Squirt (Bobby Jordan) tells the judge “My parents couldn’t come. They’re dead”; and Bugs (Gabriel Dell) explains “My mother’s in jail and my father went to get the check—we’re on relief.” The boys have committed a serious crime (they accidentally kill an innocent pawnshop owner), which would, during the height of the Production Code, cause the viewer to root for their punishment. But *Crime School* uses this extended sequence to create sympathy and remind us that the boys are not deserving of the cruel treatment awaiting them at the corrupt reform school where the judge eventually sends them.

Although such moments work to convince the audience that the Dead End Kids are essentially good boys who have been raised in the wrong environment, as I mentioned, most entries in the cycle also contain semantic elements which support an opposing point of view—that no matter how terrible slum life might be, the juvenile delinquent always has the *choice* to resist corruption and take the moral path. The majority of these films contain at least one character that grew up in the slums (like the boys) and yet still manages to steer clear of crime in order to become a respectable, even influential, member of society. Prominent examples of these moral characters include Dave Connell in *Dead End*, Father Connelly (Pat O’Brien) in *Angels with Dirty Faces*, Paul (Robert Wilcox) in *Little Tough Guy*, Danny’s cop brother Phil (Dave O’Brien) in *Neath Brooklyn Bridge* and Officer Pat O’Day (Leon Ames) in *East Side Kids*. Furthermore, the boys are often depicted as incapable of acting civilized—even when offered the opportunity to change, proving that delinquency is a choice. In *Little Tough Guy*, for example,

the gang decides to attend a “Young America” meeting, populated with upwardly mobile boys. The guest speaker regales his eager audience with platitudes like “It isn’t where you live and the kind of clothes you wear, it’s the *way* you live” and “Give everything you’ve got to whatever you’re doing.” Both statements are reiterations of the myth of the American Dream and its attendant Puritan work ethic—advice that is fairly useless to these kids (Tommy’s father was a hardworking factory employee tossed onto death row for being involved in a strike that turned deadly). As the gang, wearing ripped, stained T-shirts, wend their way through the orderly crowd of working class boys donning their Sunday best, they whack, smack and curse those around them. Eventually the entire audience is whipped into a raucous fight. This scene implies that although the boys are given the opportunity to change the *way* they live, they make the *choice* to remain delinquents. Because of the combination of PCA strictures as well as a desire to please as large a segment of the audience as possible, the Dead End Kids cycle provided its viewers with two contradictory views on the contemporary juvenile delinquent for the audience to choose from.

This ambivalence towards crime and the juvenile delinquent is best exemplified in the conclusion to *Angels with Dirty Faces*, a film about which Joseph Breen, the director of the Production Code Administration, was especially concerned. The film’s famous ending, in which Rocky Sullivan (James Cagney), hero to the Dead End Kids, “turns yellow” during his execution, is purposefully ambiguous. Did Rocky become a coward to keep the kids from admiring him or because he truly *was* a coward in the final moments of his life? The former reading makes Rocky a diegetic coward but a non-diegetic hero (and thus opposes the P.C.A.’s proviso on the depiction of criminals), while the latter reading would counter the image of Rocky as a fearless gangster-hero and appease P.C.A. regulations. Either way, within the diegesis the

Dead End Kids believe that Rocky is a coward, which convinces them to go straight. If the film ended at this moment in the film—with the boys deciding to change their delinquent ways—we could argue that *Angels with Dirty Faces* is promoting the belief that no matter what the environment, an individual always has a choice about embarking on a life of crime. The boys, seeing the way that their hero became a coward in the face of law and order, realize that the criminal life is hardly worth emulating. And Father Connelly, who committed numerous (albeit petty) crimes as a boy, is living proof of the power of moral choice. But this message is essentially counteracted by the film's final scene, in which Father Connelly, shot at a low angle and bathed in an angelic shaft of white light, making him appear even more holy and wise than usual, tells the boys "Let's go say a prayer for a boy who couldn't run as fast as I could." Here, the priest counteracts the concept of free choice by attributing his own decision to go straight as a child to the fact that he did *not* get caught and sent to reform school, which, within the diegesis of the social problem film, is a criminal-producing institution. Thus, in its final moments *Angels with Dirty Faces* leads the audience to believe that fate or chance, *not* choice, has made Father Connelly a priest and Rocky Sullivan a criminal.

While these films indicate that juvenile delinquency (whether caused by nature or nurture) is a problem, their conclusions (with the exception of the pessimistic *Dead End*) always provide the audience with visible, though inadequate, resolutions to the problems depicted—namely that poverty can be fixed through "reformed" (i.e., uncorrupt) reform schools, kindly juvenile court justices, community-minded police officers and good old American "pluck." These films concentrate more on the problems of individuals rather than society as a whole, thus making it easier to resolve their complex problems. It is a convention of the Hollywood social problem film that:

The characters and the social conflicts were polarized, the treatment of the social issues subordinated to the emotional conflicts experienced by the protagonists, and the conflicts often resolved through a populist benefactor or through the efforts of an exceptional individual who overcame economic and social constraints in the interests of the community. (Landy 433)

In *Crime School*, for example, the problems of the reform school are not attributed to the flawed structure of the criminal justice system as whole, but to one corrupt individual, Warden Morgan (Cy Kendall). This warden, who violently beats disobedient boys and subjects them to dangerous labor, is an undisputed villain and therefore the audience clearly sides with the boys in their quest to escape his clutches. *Crime School*, like other entries in the original Dead End Kids cycle, gains its moral force by playing off of agreed upon beliefs, in this case, that abusing boys and embezzling government funds is wrong, rather than a more controversial criticism of the way the criminal justice system handles the rehabilitation of juveniles. In the end, the Dead End Kids, with the help of the upright superintendent of state reformatories, Mark Braden (Humphrey Bogart), are able to “fix” the school, merely by ensuring that the corrupt Morgan goes to jail. The film’s coda reinforces the feeling that is all well when we see the newly paroled Dead End kids back in juvenile court. This time around, however, they are wearing suits, sitting with their magically in-tact families and discussing the possibility of school and careers. One boy is even reading a book entitled *How to Break into Society* (perhaps in a cheeky nod to the film’s overly rosy conclusion). Such conclusions prove the point that a hallmark of social problem films of the 1930s and 1940s is to alert viewers to a social problem but then assure them that this problem is easily solved. This point is related to another convention of social problem films: they rarely address the true causes of the problems they portray because the most frequently depicted social

problems, inner city poverty, crime, unemployment, drug abuse, etc., are far too complex to be sufficiently addressed in ninety minutes of entertainment.

The dual syntax (nature and nurture) of the Dead End Kids cycle is taken up in the ghetto action cycle as well. Films like *Boyz N the Hood*, *South Central*, and *Clockers* promote the belief that the juvenile delinquent is a product of his environment but that, with the proper guidance and desire, positive change is possible. These films, in the tradition of the social problem film, also end on a generally uplifting note, with the protagonist having finally made the right decision, that is, to abandon the world of crime. *Boyz N the Hood*, like *Angels with Dirty Faces*, stretches this dualism to its limits by comparing and contrasting two different households in the Los Angeles ghetto. On one side is Tre, who is raised by his morally upright, politically oriented father, Jason “Furious” Styles (Lawrence Fishburne). Furious, like Father Connelly and Officer Pat O’Day, has chosen a career that assists those in his neighborhood; he is a mortgage broker helping working class families finance homes in the Los Angeles area. Furious thus becomes a model of “modern,” relatable parenting, holding impromptu street corner lectures on gentrification and warning his son to always wear a condom because “Any fool with a dick can make a baby, but it takes a real man to raise his children.” This model of parenting, tough love mixed with a pragmatic understanding of the male teenager’s sexual drives, is, according to the film, an effective way to manage contemporary youth. At the film’s climax Tre decides not to avenge the death of the murdered Ricky, a decision which ultimately saves his life. His successful decision points to both his disciplined upbringing as well as his strong moral fiber (nurture *and* nature).

Acting as Tre’s double and moral foil (much as Rocky was Father Connelly’s foil) is Doughboy. Hardened by the streets, Doughboy understands that avenging his brother’s

murder will most likely bring about his own death, and yet he does so anyway. Doughboy's tough persona, which is considerably enhanced by the extra-diegetic knowledge that he is played by former N.W.A. member Ice Cube,<sup>65</sup> appears incapable of change. By comparing Tre, who survives the 'hood unscathed and eventually attends college, with Doughboy, who dies two weeks after avenging his brother's murder, *Boyz N the Hood* establishes the dual syntax of the social problem film. We are encouraged to feel sympathy for Doughboy's plight when we see his neighborhood and upbringing, but the presence of Tre, who eventually "chooses" to make the right decisions, to shun violence and embrace college, removes society's burden of responsibility.<sup>66</sup> Of course, these conclusions are complicated by the presence of Ricky (Morris Chestnut), who was *not* involved in any gang-related activities and, like Tre, was planning on attending college the next fall (albeit for sports rather than academics). Ricky made all the right choices (except for impregnating his girlfriend), yet he was killed. Ricky's death renders *Boyz N the Hood*'s ultimate message ambiguous, complicating the simple dual syntax (i.e., nature vs. nurture) of the social problem film. This glimmer of social critique is solidified by Doughboy's speech, a "message with a capital M" par excellence, in the film's final scene: "Either they don't know, don't show, or don't care what's going on," he laments to Tre, the day after killing Ricky's assassins. "They" in this statement is society as a whole, including the film's viewers, thus positioning the film's viewers as also being partially responsible for Ricky's untimely death.

Following the conventions of the social problem film, many ghetto action films provide viewers with reassuring, unambiguous, individual solutions to inner city poverty, drug

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<sup>65</sup> In a *Jet* interview Ice Cube explained the appeal of using rap stars in ghetto action films: "Movies are fantasy based on reality. And rappers represent reality in the community" ("Why are rap stars so appealing as actors?").

<sup>66</sup> Indeed, in numerous interviews, director John Singleton, who based the character of Tre on his own childhood, puts most of the blame for inner city violence on black families, explaining that "Parents don't teach their kids. These kids are committing acts of violence because they're in search of manhood" (Collier).

abuse, gang banging and child abuse. *South Central*, *Clockers* and Tre's narrative in *Boyz N the Hood* all conclude with a resolution of the protagonists' central conflicts: *South Central*'s Bobby (Glen Plummer) reclaims his son Jimmie (Christian Coleman) from the clutches of gang life at the last minute, *Clockers*' Strike (Mekhi Phifer) escapes the ghetto on a train, and Tre Styles attends college in Atlanta while maintaining a loving, respectful relationship with his girlfriend, Brandi (Nia Long). These solutions are, of course, temporary palliatives for the social ills depicted in the films—Jimmie will still have to make it through his adolescence in South Central and Tre's friends (or what's left of them) are all still living in the 'hood. Of course, other films in the ghetto action cycle, like *Menace II Society*, *Fresh* and Doughboy's narrative in *Boyz N the Hood*, all conclude on a note of extreme pessimism, indicating that the vast problems of the inner city ghetto *cannot* be resolved in any simple way by the film's final reel. These films explicitly reject the individual solutions promoted in most social problem films: *Menace II Society*'s Caine is shot at the moment he decides to make a positive change in his life, *Fresh* escapes the ghetto but only at the expense of many people he loves, and, while *Boyz N the Hood* provides us with Tre's happy ending, it nevertheless reminds us that Doughboy is without one.

*Straight Out of Brooklyn* is one of the most pessimistic entries in the ghetto action cycle. In addition to the film's aforementioned brutal opening scene of domestic violence, the film also repeatedly calls attention to the larger social environment. Throughout the film we are provided with the same image, an aerial shot of the Red Hook projects at different times of the day and from slightly different angles and distances. This repeated shot therefore references not just Red Hook in 1991, but the neighborhood's status as a place that people continually leave

once they better their lot.<sup>67</sup> The film is populated with exterior shots of bleakly functional structures—low income housing units, the hospital, the New York State Department of Labor—dreary symbols of what Red Hook has to offer its residents. These bland buildings stand in sharp contrast to the Manhattan skyline, visible from the Brooklyn Promenade, which beckons Dennis with its aesthetic inventiveness. Dennis’ decision to rob a local gangsta in order to get out of Red Hook as quickly as possible, a decision which leads to the death of his father (and more indirectly, his mother), is placed on the stark socioeconomic conditions of Red Hook and neighborhoods like it. However, much like *Boyz N the Hood*, which blames both social conditions, including gentrification, white-based testing standards, the paucity of fulfilling jobs for young black men, as well as the poor choices made by gangstas like Doughboy for the protagonists’ fates, *Straight Out of Brooklyn* blames both the environment *and* the individual (in the film’s final statement),<sup>68</sup> for the protagonist’s plight.

According to Cesare Zavattini, who theorized about the possibilities of Italian Neorealism in his article “Some Ideas on the Cinema” (1953), to end a film about poverty, or any other major social problem, with a solution, would be false, since in reality, these problems have not yet been solved: “It is not the concern of an artist to propound solutions. It is enough, and quite a lot, I should say, to make an audience feel the need, the urgency, for them” (56). Here Zavattini elaborates the main contribution that cinema can make to social welfare—to create a sense of urgency about prominent social problems. According to Zavattini, the films which are able to provide the most radical critiques of society are those which end inconclusively or pessimistically. He argues that when films end on a note of resolution the audience feels a sense

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<sup>67</sup> According to Robert Singer, the neighborhood of Red Hook and its “legendary housing project complex seems the place where working-class anxiety thrives and festers” (157).

<sup>68</sup> See Chapter 1 for a discussion of the film’s final “square up.”

of relief and the urgency created by the depiction of the social problem dissipates. Of course, all of these films, whether they end on a note of reconciliation and closure like *Crime School* and *South Central* or pessimism and doubt, like *Dead End* and *Menace II Society*, are nevertheless Hollywood commodities, which need to make a profit for their studios. As such, they are unable to offer a viable critique of the true causes of the problems they depict (and thus potentially alienate portions of the audience), let alone any applicable solutions. Thus, social problem films are, at best, a safety valve for society's grievances: "Allusions to the genuine concerns of the audience play up antisocial feelings only to exorcise them on safe targets contained within dramatic rather than social context. The effect is cathartic, purging us for the time being of anxieties and guilt over the state of the world" (Roffman and Purdy 305). Both the *Dead End Kids* and ghetto action cycles provide this catharsis, allowing us to both weep over the plight of urban youth and feel reassured that there is a feasible solution.

## 2.2 A THEORY OF CYCLE EVOLUTION

A film cycle can only come into existence if its originary film, that is the film which establishes the semantics and syntax for that cycle, is: 1) financially or critically successful, 2) addresses a topic of contemporary social interest, and 3) if it has a set of central semantics that are recognizable enough to be repeated in several more films.<sup>69</sup> The *Dead End Kids* cycle of the late 1930s and the ghetto action cycle of the early 1990s were able to form because the first entry in

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<sup>69</sup> So for example, while a gangster film has strong, consistent iconography (guns, cars, an urban setting), the musical has weak, inconsistent iconography. For this reason, Thomas Schatz labels genres like the musical and the screwball comedy as "genres of indeterminate space" since they rely "less upon a heavily coded place than on a highly conventionalized value system" (29).

each, *Dead End*<sup>70</sup> and *Boyz N the Hood*,<sup>71</sup> respectively, were critical and financial successes,<sup>72</sup> tapped into contemporary social anxieties over the plight of urban youth and had iconic characters and settings. For example, the Dead End Kids cycle came to fruition partially due to the fact that in the mid-1930s there was increasing attention on the links between urbanization, immigration and juvenile delinquency. Clifford Shaw's influential 1929 book, *Delinquency Areas* argued that "delinquency followed a geographic pattern, concentrated in zones of high criminality at the center, and surrounded by areas of receding instances of delinquency" (Gilbert 127). Furthermore, jobs for youth were extremely difficult to find during the Great Depression, which was one factor leading juvenile crime rates to more than double in the 1930s. The large number of children who were orphaned or homeless as a result of the Great Depression was also a growing concern (this phenomenon was documented in the social problem film *Wild Boys of the Road* [1933, William A. Wellman]). Therefore, it is not surprising that these concerns would be translated into a cycle of social problem films.<sup>73</sup>

Similar discourses about crime and youth paved the way for the success of the ghetto action cycle. As I argued in the previous chapter, in the late 1980s and early 1990s the

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<sup>70</sup> Roffman and Purdy explain "Although a couple of films had previously treated juvenile delinquency, it was Samuel Goldwyn's *Dead End* [1937] that popularized the problem and really started the cycle" (136).

<sup>71</sup> *New Jack City*, released in the same year as *Boyz N the Hood*, also helped to initiate the ghetto action cycle. However, this film focuses primarily on adult criminality as opposed to the effects of the urban environment on youth.

<sup>72</sup> I have not yet been able to locate box office numbers for *Dead End*. However, the amount of press surrounding the film and its numerous Academy Award nominations points to the fact that contemporary audiences were highly aware of the film, even if they did not pay to see it. Likewise, through they never provide exact numbers, Roffman and Purdy refer to *Dead End*'s "box office success" (141). According to [boxofficemojo.com](http://boxofficemojo.com) *Boyz N the Hood* had a budget of \$6.5 million and made over \$57 million in domestic grosses.

<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, although a portion of the audience wanted to see these films (evidenced by the fact that the studios continued to make them), part of the audience also feared that the popularity of films like *Dead End* would generate even more incidents of delinquency. Huntz Hall, star of the original Dead End Kids cycle as well as the Monogram and Universal spin-off cycles, describes the popular reaction to his films in the context of the moral panic over juvenile delinquency in the 1930s: "[People say] 'These kids should be put out of pictures, they're bad, they don't even believe that [Cagney's character in *Angels with Dirty Faces*] finked out to go to the electric chair'" (qtd. in Hayes and Walker 28). This fear, that the attempt to depict a social problem would only serve to glamorize and thus exacerbate it, was likewise generated by the ghetto action cycle and the popular press' reaction to it.

American public was becoming increasingly concerned about the relationship between youth, race, inner city crime, drug abuse and poverty.<sup>74</sup> Several high profile media events associating urban black youth with violence (the 1989 rape and beating of a Central Park jogger by black teenagers, incidents of violence at rap concerts, and increasing coverage of gang wars in Los Angeles) aided in the creation of a generalized panic surrounding the black inner city, creating the indelible image, to quote President Clinton in 1994, of “13-year-olds...with automatic weapons” (qtd. in Males 103). Perhaps the most significant of these images was born with the release of a video tape depicting the brutal beating of Rodney King by the LAPD in March of 1991. After the acquittal of the four LAPD officers implicated in the incident in April 1992, a rebellion (or riot, depending on which media source is consulted)<sup>75</sup> began in South Central Los Angeles. It lasted for almost three days, destroyed 800 buildings and resulted in the deaths of over fifty people. Of course, the Rodney King trial verdict was not the sole cause of this rebellion/riot. The socioeconomic situation in Los Angeles had been extremely grim for years: unemployment was exceedingly high, the city was experiencing its worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, the “war on drugs” had turned L.A. neighborhoods into literal war zones, and friction between various racial and ethnic groups, particularly between the relatively new Korean population and the long established black population (Mitchell A1), was growing daily (Campbell). One gang member, interviewed just after the riots, explains “It’s not just Rodney King and it’s not just LaTasha.”<sup>76</sup> It’s thousands of Black Americans that been living in

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<sup>74</sup> Mike Males’ book *The Scapegoat Generation: America’s War on Adolescents* (1996) analyzes, among other issues, how 1990s teenagers, particularly black males, were understood by mainstream society as being violent, out of control criminals. He cites a 1994 Gallup poll which revealed that the average American adult believes that youths commit 43 percent of all violent crime in the U.S., whereas the true figure was only 13 percent (Males 102).

<sup>75</sup> In his article “The L.A. Rebellion,” James Bernard explains that “This was no riot. It was a rebellion” (39).

<sup>76</sup> On March 16, 1991 (2 weeks before the Rodney King beating) LaTasha Harlins, a black teenager, was shot in the head by a Korean grocer for shoplifting a bottle of orange juice in a South Central convenience store. The storeowner received no jail time, just probation and community service, for the shooting (Ford B1).

the ghetto, and we're tired of it in 1992" (qtd. in Bernard 40). The ghetto action film successfully tapped into these various real and media-exacerbated concerns.

Contemporary film reviews, one of the first ways in which a film's structures of meaning are communicated to a mass audience, helped this exploitation process by consistently describing these two film cycles as addressing timely social issues, as films that today's audiences *needed* to see. In a 1937 issue of the *National Board of Review Magazine*, for instance, New York City's Tenement House Commissioner described *Dead End* as a film which successfully exposes "the horrible influences surrounding the children of the slums." He also called the film a great piece of "propaganda" (qtd. in Stead 94). A *New York Times* review claimed that *Dead End* "deserves a place among the important motion pictures of 1937 for its all-out and well-presented reiteration of the social protest that was the theme of the original Sidney Kingsley stage play" and that it made a "prima facie case for a revision of the social system" (McManus). Finally, a review in *Time* concludes that "The not unhappy ending of the screen version of *Dead End* is no less valid than that of the stage original, should strike even the most critical cinemagoers as art rather than artifice" ("The New Pictures"). Similarly, when *Boyz N the Hood* debuted in 1991, film reviewers and the mainstream media uniformly decreed its profound social significance. Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* wrote that "By the end of *Boyz N the Hood*, I realized I had seen not simply a brilliant directorial debut, but an American film of enormous importance," while Desson Howe of *The Washington Post* called the film "timely" telling his readers, "If you don't live in or near one of these neighborhoods, just turn to the news at 11 to see." When Ice Cube was interviewed about *Boyz N the Hood* in *The Source*, a magazine created for and marketed to hip hop fans, he was asked, "Does the movie depict real life?" to which he responded "Most definitely! It's not even a movie people can criticize. People

should just be happy that they are really getting a look into our world” (32). Even contemporary academic publications supported these readings. Michael Eric Dyson’s 1992 article, “Between Apocalypse and Redemption: John Singleton’s *Boyz N the Hood*,” claims the film is “the most brilliantly executed and fully realized portrait of the coming-of-age odyssey that black boys must undertake in the suffocating conditions of urban decay and civic chaos” (122). Singleton himself supported these readings of his film; in a 1991 interview he told *Essence* magazine “I wanted to show the lives of people we’re taught not to care about” and that he made the movie so that “my generation will learn something” (Little).

The uniformity of these discourses about the Dead End Kids and ghetto action cycle (they comment on the realism, social importance and timeliness of these films) indicates how certain patterns of interpretation, motivated by the filmic text, historical context and studio-issued press kits and advertisements, coalesce into a single narrative and help to preemptively define the content of a film or group of films—in this case, that both film cycles were socially important. Thus, while it is nearly impossible to understand exactly how diverse viewing audiences read and understood these two film cycles, it *is* possible to examine the generalized *public* meanings that were being circulated around these texts by reading contemporary reviews, editorials and studio advertising strategies. I am borrowing this approach from Janet Staiger’s concept of “historical reception studies” which “attempts to illuminate the cultural meanings of texts in specific times and social circumstances to specific viewers, and it attempts to contribute to discussions about the spectatorial effects of films by moving beyond text-centered analyses” (143). Staiger believes that a viewer’s understanding of a text is always dependent upon an interaction with other viewers as well as with these public discourses. Thus my theorization of how and why cycles evolve to fit the needs of their audiences will be a historical materialist’s

perspective, tracked primarily by how public discourses (issued by the press, the studios, and when available, representatives of the diverse movie-going audience) reacted to each new entry in each cycle. I do not wish to equate these public discourses with the actual viewing audience, since not all film-goers familiarize themselves with reviews or advertising before going to see a film, and if they do, they do not react to these discourses to the same degree or in the same way. Instead, I am attempting to paint a picture of the social and cultural context, the historical moment, upon which a viewer's reading of these films is at least partially predicated. Though all viewers make independent readings of texts, we are nevertheless profoundly shaped by the information circulating around us at the moment we happen to watch the film—"free readers" do not exist (Staiger 143). What I hope to uncover in the remainder of this chapter is a tentative theory of how and why these two social problem cycles begin to veer away from their serious or timely issues and why.

Because *Dead End* was both a commercial and critical success, its themes, formulas, and young cast were reused in several Warner Brothers released films: *Crime School*, *Angels with Dirty Faces*, *They Made Me a Criminal*, *Hell's Kitchen*, *Angels Wash Their Faces* (1939, Ray Enright), and *On Dress Parade* (1939, William Clemens). All of these films, with the exception of *On Dress Parade*, can be considered social problem films because their plots are devoted to illuminating a contemporary social concern in an entertaining fashion. As I mentioned, *Dead End*, the only film of the original cycle *not* released by Warner Brothers, concluded without a resolution to the boys' problems,<sup>77</sup> while the other films in the cycle offered "solutions" reinforcing the status quo and reconciling the boys with society. Even though the films in this cycle were derivative, film reviewers continued to describe the early entries in the

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<sup>77</sup> Roffman and Purdy explain "Though its box office success warranted a number of spin-offs, few producers besides Goldwyn [of MGM] would tolerate an openended [sic] discussion of social wrong" (141).

Dead End Kids cycle as capable of effectively discussing contemporary social ills. For example, a *Photoplay* capsule review of *Crime School*, the second film in the cycle, explains “Those ‘Dead End’ boys are here again, and you’d better go to see them, as they lit a somewhat grim social problem picture to fascinating entertainment” (6). This review gets to the paradox at the heart of the social problem film—that disturbing social problems can become the basis of popular entertainment. A review in the *New York Times* is slightly more critical of *Crime School*, noting that it “bears a family resemblance to ‘Dead End’ and to ‘San Quentin,’ not to mention the old Cagney film, ‘The Mayor of Hell’” (Nugent 17). While Nugent is annoyed with what he sees as a distinct pattern forming in the films—the boys are delinquents who eventually reform—he also writes that the “close range study of the screen’s six best bad boys” is, nevertheless, “fascinating” (17).

Although the third entry in the cycle, *Angels with Dirty Faces*, was formulaic, with the kids revisiting the delinquent personas first deployed in *Dead End* and *Crime School*, the film was still generally well-received by critics. *Time* magazine, for example, thought the conclusion was somewhat heavy-handed but, “Cinema morals aside, *Angels With Dirty Faces* is a fine job of cinema technique. Rowland Brown’s story and Michael Curtiz’ direction bring nothing new to racketeer melodrama, but the brisk rattle of Cagney’s conversation and his associates’ machine guns has a pleasantly nostalgic quality. The film lives up to one of the year’s best titles” (“The New Pictures”). The reviewer’s praise is primarily directed at James Cagney, who by the late 1930s was a certified star famous for playing hard scrabble gangsters, rather than the film’s repetition of the Dead End Kids formula. The latter was clearly beginning to wear thin with critics. But given MGM’s and then Warner Brothers’ success with exploiting the topic of juvenile delinquency, it is not surprising that several other studios began releasing films with

similar characters and themes at this time. Monogram released *Boys of the Streets* (1938, William Nigh)<sup>78</sup> and *Streets of New York* (1939, William Nigh), Columbia made *Boy's Reformatory* (1939, Lewis D. Collins), MGM made *Boy's Town* (1938, Norman Taurog) and RKO released *Boy Slaves* (1939, P.J. Wolfson). The latter even uses an actor who resembles Huntz Hall, perhaps with the hope that audiences might get confused and think that the film was part of the Dead End Kids series. There were also female variations on the Dead End Kids formula released concurrently with the original cycle, such as *Girls on Probation* (1938, William C McGann) and *Beloved Brat* (1938, Arthur Lubin). The films starred Dead End Kids regulars Ronald Reagan and Leo Gorcey, respectively, and were released by First National, a production company under the umbrella of Warner Brothers. And Million Dollar Productions created a black cast version of the formula in 1939, entitled *Reform School* (Leo C. Popkin), which spawned a mini-cycle of its own called the Harlem Tuff Kids.<sup>79</sup> Thus, from approximately 1937-1939 the film market was saturated with images of juvenile delinquents of all races and sexes suffering from various social injustices (Roffman and Purdy 144).

Attendant to this surge in films about juvenile delinquency in the late 1930s was a change in public discourses surrounding these films. While *Dead End* was considered a piece of “social protest” upon its release, a *Photoplay* review of *Streets of New York*, a juvenile delinquent film starring popular street urchin Jackie Cooper just two years later, describes the film’s depiction of “an underprivileged kid’s regeneration” as “routine” (8). The appearance of these films, released by different studios, also affected the way the original Dead End Kids cycle was received. A *Photoplay* review of *Hell's Kitchen* claims that by the end of the film the boys

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<sup>78</sup> This film was pitched as being even “grittier” than *Dead End* “*Dead End* without clothes; *Dead End* without any make up” (Hayes and Walker 223).

<sup>79</sup> Note to reader: I only recently discovered the existence of this film cycle. I plan to research it further in hope to screen some of these films, if possible.

have “made a ‘Boy’s Town’ out of *Hell’s Kitchen*” (86), implying that it is a knock off of *Boy’s Town* (though *Boy’s Town* was released *after* the Dead End Kids cycle was initiated). Bosley Crowther also appears wearied by the repetitiveness of *Hell’s Kitchen*: “The Dead End Kids, Inc., have been so stubbornly anti-social for so long that it might surprise you to discover them in their latest film, ‘Hell’s Kitchen,’ at the Globe, as a stalwart band of misused youngsters, tucked away in a shelter home for boys, just awearying for a quick regeneration from which (this time) they are brazenly deprived” (14). The predictability of the Dead End Kids formula, this time in its fifth iteration, had clearly weakened the cycle’s capacity for social critique.

Therefore, as early as 1939, critics found the Dead End Kids-initiated juvenile delinquent cycle to be “routine” and clichéd: “the questions about the slums were so familiar that they did not have to be raised...The delinquents are reformed without any change in the slums or in the economic structure that produced them” (Roffman and Purdy 144). According to contemporary public discourses, the main source of this cycle’s appeal—its exploitation of contemporary social problems—was no longer believable. To list just a few examples: *Photoplay*’s review of *Little Tough Guy*, the first entry in Universal’s cycle, comments on its by now familiar approach to plot “if you examine the rather fabricated story too closely, you will find both this idea and that of ‘Crime School’ had the same origin” (52). And a *New York Times* review of the 1940 film, *Pride of the Bowery* laments:

There was a time when...we, too, believed that the Dead End Kids or their current facsimiles could be converted to the better and finer things of life. No more. For after an innumerable series of soul-launderings and glib regenerations they are bobbing up again...That spark of decency invariably fanned into a bright pure

flame in the last reel is again given the bellows by the authors, but we don't trust it. (T.S. 15)

Here it seems difficult for the reviewer to continue to buy into the “truth” of these characters—they have become mere “facsimiles” of characters found in *Dead End*. Bosley Crowther notes, in his review of *Angels Wash Their Faces*, that the “the Dead Enders (though the traffic in them seems more worthy of an arterial highway) are pitting themselves against the injustices of an adult world with unsurprising success, considering the way they've grown” (21). And by 1941 he was positively fed up. In a column entitled “Gnashing of Teeth: Here Are a Few of the Things to Which This Column Took Exception This Year,” Crowther concluded his long list of grievances with this plea: “But the truly wonderful thing would be a liquidation of the ‘Dead End’ Kids and all their assorted gangs of hoodlums which have been offshoots thereof. The picture we are waiting to see is the one in which those kids are rounded up, faced against a wall and mowed down with machine gun fire, followed by a notarized caption, ‘This is absolutely the last appearance of the Dead End Kids’” (X9).

Even coverage of the film cycle's actors began to change its tone over time. For example, *The New York Times* did a piece on the young actors just before the release of *Dead End* in 1937, describing them as kids from the streets of New York who were bowled over when director William Wyler show up on set riding a motorcycle and found it difficult to relate to costar Sylvia Sydney since “guys like us just don't get along with dames” (qtd. Pryor X3). The actors are characterized as sincere ingénues, appropriately dazzled by the excitement of Hollywood, and nervous around starlets and women in general, like any regular teenage boys might be. However, just two years later, in January of 1940, *The Times* portrayed the same group of actors as consumed with the Hollywood life of “dames, cars and pictures” (118). Even the title

of the piece, “Victims of Café Society,” mocks the boys’ new socioeconomic status, and its incongruity with the type of characters they portray on the big screen. The reporter describes the actors as “professional street urchins” and lingered on details, like the fact that Leo Gorcey was particular about the way his cocktails were prepared (Franchey 118), that highlighted the actors’ attempts to carry themselves like the Hollywood elite. The boys, once depicted as real and earnest, are now fake Hollywood wannabees, a transformation mirroring the way the semantics of the Dead End Kids cycle were perceived by critics over time. Indeed, if part of a social problem film’s claims to authenticity are predicated on the use of unknown or character actors, whose screen presence cannot easily be associated with the real life actor or the glamour of Hollywood,<sup>80</sup> then the increasing fame of the Dead End Kids would have also affected the ability of these films to convey a sense of realism and social urgency to audience’s familiar with their offscreen personas.

Interestingly, even though the themes and images of the Dead End Kids were expanded into an industry-wide cycle (i.e., a cycle which is released by multiple studios at once) within one year of their cinematic debut in 1937, this “juvenile delinquent cycle” never developed into a stable, coherent *genre* of its own. This example runs counter to Rick Altman’s theory that while a group of films is still a studio-based cycle, using contract actors and proprietary characters (particularly during the reign of the studio system), other studios will not attempt to release similar films. Altman’s reasoning is that if, for example, Monogram released a film about juvenile delinquents while Warner Brothers was still making the Dead End Kids films, then Monogram would only be adding to the buzz surrounding Warner Brothers’ “proprietary” cycle. Only “When conditions are favorable,” Altman argues, can “single-studio

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<sup>80</sup> Casare Zavattini explains “In neorealism, as I intend it, everyone must be his own actor. To want one person to play another implies a calculated plot, the fable, and not ‘things’ happening.” (59-60).

cycles can be built into industry-wide genres” (61). By “favorable conditions” Altman is referring to the moment when a cycle can be defined by elements that are both widely perceived by audiences and “easily” shared by studios (i.e., recognizable plots and settings as opposed to recognizable actors). However, as I have just demonstrated, *Dead End* knock offs were released less than a year after *Dead End* and concurrently with the remainder of the Dead End Kids cycle, and yet this industry-wide juvenile delinquent cycle never developed into its own genre. Consequently, while I agree that the industry-wide adoption of a cycle may *sometimes* lead to the formation of a stable and coherent genre, it may also lead to the exact opposite effect—the collapse of that cycle.<sup>81</sup>

A similar pattern of cycle formation, evolution and collapse occurs with the ghetto action cycle’s deployment of the semantics and syntax of the social problem film. From 1991 through 1996 the films of this cycle are primarily “serious” treatments of the plight of black youth living in the inner city. A few of these films even take up the gangster and social problem film convention of opening or closing with a square up or some message directed at the audience. *Straight Out of Brooklyn* concludes with the words “First things learned are hardest to forget. Tradition passes from one generation to the next. We need to change”; *Boyz N the Hood* opens with criminal statistics about “black on black” crime and ends with the words “Increase the Peace”; and *Clockers* opens with recreated police photographs of murdered black men, pointing to the ubiquity of racially-motivated murder in the ghetto. Many ghetto action films also place their “message with a capital M” within the text, to be spoken by figures of authority like school teachers (*Menace II Society*), reformed, Muslim cellmates (*South Central*), wise fathers

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<sup>81</sup> Note to reader: I hope to eventually find some documentation for why, exactly, Warner Brothers decided to stop making Dead End Kids films after the release of *On Dress Parade*, to see if that backs up my theory of cycle exhaustion.

(Furious in *Boyz N the Hood* and Sam in *Fresh*), and well-meaning detectives (*Clockers*). The message relayed by these figures of authority remains consistent from film to film: life is tough for the young black male in the inner city and in order to survive he must stay out of trouble and get an education, but also understand that society is always already prejudiced against him. “Being a black man in America isn’t easy. The hunt is on,” Mr. Butler (Charles S. Dutton) tells Caine in *Menace II Society*, “and you’re the prey.”

As early as 1992, just one year after the release of *Boyz N the Hood*, public discourses surrounding its imitators, like *Juice* and *South Central*, demonstrated a familiarity with the images, narrative formulas, and social messages of the burgeoning cycle. This awareness is apparent, for example, in contemporary reviews<sup>82</sup> of the 1992 ghetto action film, *South Central*. Mainstream critics (i.e., white critics writing for major publications) like Roger Ebert of *The Chicago Sun-Times*, Owen Gleiberman of *Entertainment Weekly* and Rita Kempley of *The Washington Post*, among others, all cite *Boyz N Hood* in their reviews of *South Central* as a way to contextualize its now familiar semantics and syntax, a move which assumes that readers interested in seeing *South Central* would also be familiar with films like *Boyz N the Hood*. Many of these critics also acknowledge that *despite* its repetition of characters and plot formulas found in *Boyz N the Hood*, *South Central* is still able to effectively convey its social message. Gleiberman, for example, found *South Central* to be “less technically accomplished than John Singleton’s *Boyz N the Hood* but, I think, even more emotionally stirring” while Kempley wrote that “*South Central* covers some of the same ground as *Boyz N the Hood*, but certainly there’s

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<sup>82</sup> Note to reader: Thus far I have not been able to find any contemporary reviews of ghetto action films in mainstream publications targeted at black readers, like *Jet*, *Ebony* and *Essence*, since these magazines did not have regular film review features in the early- to mid-1990s. *Jet* occasionally provided brief, capsule film reviews but no critical evaluations of the films. Only *The Source*, which I quote frequently, engages with this film cycle in a critical way. I plan to keep pursuing this line of research, however.

nothing wrong with reiterating its positive message for black sons and fathers.” It is possible to attribute this positive reception of the cycle, which reads it as authentic and socially incisive, to the fact these white, upper middle class intellectuals (and their target readership) exist outside of the culture depicted in this film cycle. These derivative images seem accurate because they reflect the predominant imagery of urban blackness being circulated in the popular imagination in the early 1990s (Kelley “Looking” 120).

However, critics writing for magazines more clearly targeted at African American youth, like *The Source*, tired of the ghetto action formula earlier than more mainstream critics. Since *The Source* marketed itself as a magazine in touch with the pulse of the hip hop community (a primarily urban, male African American community), it is safe to assume that its writers would be more adept at spotting stereotypes about this community than the writers at *Entertainment Weekly* or *The Chicago Sun-Times*. As early as March 1992, Colson Whitehead cynically advised his *Source* readers:

Some tips for those who have not yet put together their own ‘Black’ film: find a rapper, preferably one that has had exposure on MTV; pick a corny cliché that has already worked many times before (rags-to-riches, say, or fish-out-of-water—heck, why not use both?); get some music, because if the movie doesn’t sell, maybe the soundtrack will; then mix thoroughly and wait for those royalty checks to pile up. Oh yeah, one more thing—get a Black director. (47)

It is significant that as early as 1992, when only a few ghetto action films had been released, this particular writer already detected a formula in “black films”: a rags to riches narrative, a rapper in a starring role and a marketable soundtrack. Less than one year after the release of *Boyz N the Hood*, the ghetto action formula had been repeated so often that the social messages of these

films were somehow overshadowed by what was seen as a rampant exploitation of black interests.<sup>83</sup> In order to remain financially viable or to effectively communicate with overused or exhausted images, film cycles either need to find a new syntax for their overused semantics<sup>84</sup> or a new way of expressing these semantic elements. Consequently, a ghetto action film released relatively late in the cycle, like *New Jersey Drive* (1995, Nick Gomez), a straight-forward, repetitious telling of the “life in the ghetto” story, suffers from what Hal Hinson of *The Washington Post* calls overexposure: “What was once shocking and revelatory has become routine, conventional, losing its punch, its credibility, its power to instruct.” Caryn James of *The New York Times* calls the plot “familiar” and “generic,” adding that the audience will be able to easily predict the protagonists’ fates because “anyone who has seen ‘Boyz N the Hood’ or ‘Menace II Society,’—films with stronger narrative shape and sense of character—knows that one of these men is doomed.” Only films taking an inventive and/or self reflexive stance towards the original material, like *Clockers* (which constantly refers to the stereotyping which occurs in later ghetto action films) and *Fresh* (which focuses on an 11-year-old drug dealer), still seemed capable of resonating with critics in some way.

It also appears that in addition to boring the critics with their clichéd plots and characters, the later entries in the ghetto action cycle failed to resonate with audiences. As the cycle aged, it generated less and less money for studios. *Boyz N the Hood* made over \$10 million during its opening weekend, *Menace II Society* made \$3.8 and *Clockers* made \$4.4. *New Jersey Drive*, however, raked in the lowest opening weekend of the ghetto action cycle, with just \$1.3

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<sup>83</sup> This writer did, however, see *Juice* as an exception, finding it to be realistic and effective in its goal of illuminating a contemporary social problem: “By creating such a vivid landscape for his story—an unforgiving New York which urges self destruction in pursuit of hollow glory—Dickerson overcomes his well-worn plot. His Harlem is gritty and real...” (Whitehead 48).

<sup>84</sup> Rick Altman argues that “When a genre reaches a saturation point, studios must either abandon it, restrict it to ‘B’ productions, or handle it in a new way” (62).

million. Given these decreasing opening weekend numbers (the barometer most contemporary studios use to gauge a film's overall commercial success), producers of ghetto action films realized that this particular cycle was no longer financially viable. Likewise, public discourses (in both predominantly white and black periodicals) which expressed an apparent "exhaustion" with films about violence, drugs and gangs in black neighborhoods<sup>85</sup> also motivated producers to abandon the ghetto action film's social problem film syntax and to move into other generic formats. This exhaustion with the problems of the black ghetto is also most likely tied to a shift in the mainstream perception of this issue from a belief that the nation's cities were overrun with gangs to the feeling that the situation was somehow improving. By the mid-1990s the nationwide drop in crime, coupled with a strong economy, generated a "new optimism" in the black community. In 1999 a *Newsweek* article explained that: "while drugs, violence and unemployment continued to plague ghetto communities [throughout the late 1990s], the issue lost currency as the perception grew that these were not exclusively Black problems, and that Black youths were no longer without options" (Smith).<sup>86</sup>

### **2.2.1 A Move to Comedy**

I have outlined how a combination of negative critical discourses and decreased box office returns forced studios to either make changes in the Dead End Kids and ghetto action cycles, or to abandon them entirely. But why exactly did audiences stop going to see these films and why were critics so hostile towards them? Certainly part of the box office decrease is related to the

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<sup>85</sup> See, for example, Jacquie Jones' "The New Ghetto Aesthetic" in *Wide Angle*, Kalamu ya Salaam's piece "Black Macho: The Myth of the Positive Message" in *The Black Film Review*, Mark Lowery's "The Making of 'Hollywood'" in *Black Enterprise*.

<sup>86</sup> See also Ellis Cose, et al.'s article "The Good News About Black America" in *Newsweek*, June 7, 1999.

sheer volume of films—how many films addressing the same topic can audiences be expected to pay to see in such a short time period? However, it also appears that the process of cycle formation had a profound effect on the ability of both film cycles to effectively communicate with their critics and audiences. In order for a cycle to form, it needs to repeat the same images and plots over and over within a short period of time (in order to capitalize on the contemporary audience's interest before they move on to the next trend). This derivative type of repetition occurs because film producers frequently act as “film critics,” analyzing and isolating the most bankable elements of a financially successful film and then repeating only those elements in their next release in order to maximize profit potential (Altman 43). Steve Neale labels this process “systemization,” or the repetition and exploitation of a film's most marketable elements (*Genre* 51). In the case of the *Dead End Kids* cycle, its semantic elements (plucky street urchins, urban settings, run-ins with the police) were the most bankable and so they were isolated and repeated in film after film, while cycle's social problem syntax became less and less important to the overall film. Similarly, given the immense popularity, in the mid-1990s, of both gangsta rap and hip hop related fashions, studios isolated the ghetto action films' commodifiable imagery (of gangstas, rap music and souped up convertibles), rather than its social message, as its most financially viable element, and reused those elements in more films.

As I have just demonstrated, this very process of systemization, which functions to create a film cycle, also contains the seeds of its own destruction. The original syntax or thematics of these social problem films, which were once capable of generating awareness about and empathy for a timely social issue, became increasingly lost as its semantic elements were duplicated too often in too short of a time period. After so much repetition it becomes too difficult to concentrate on the text and what it is trying to communicate—instead the viewer can

only notice the resemblance between the text at hand and those which came before it. Therefore, the images of *South Central* were referents, not of real individuals suffering in a real world, but rather of the images found in previous films, like *Boyz N the Hood*. Over time the dialectic between image and meaning eventually drops away, reducing the cycle's images to signifiers detached from their signified; when watching a film like *South Central* we are looking *at* the text, rather than through it. Without this dialectic between the signifier and the signified, between semantics and syntax, the images of these films could no longer be linked in any meaningful way with the real world concerns they once represented. And since these images were unable to generate empathy, the films of this cycle could no longer function *as* social problem films, since empathy was one of their primary advertising hooks. For example, in the original Dead End Kids cycle Huntz Hall's propensity for malapropisms was developed as a way to show how the boys have not been properly educated, serving as veiled social commentary about America's class inequities. After the repetition of this convention in so many films, Hall's verbal confusion is transformed into his "schtick" (particularly in later "Bowery Boys" cycle) and an excuse to endure physical violence at the hands of Leo Gorcey.

Once the semantics of these cycles lost their grounding in their original syntax, they had to be attached to a new generic syntax to continue to generate a box office. From the patterns established by these two cycles, the first response appears to be a move into comedy. This move makes sense since the comedy has weak, inconsistent iconography and therefore is able to easily "combine with or to parody virtually every other genre or form" (Neale 66). For this reason, Thomas Schatz labels genres like the musical and the comedy as "genres of indeterminate space" since they rely "less upon a heavily coded place than on a highly conventionalized value system" (29). Virtually any genre, no matter how strong its visual

elements, can be rendered in the comic mode. In *Dead End* the image of a boy stealing potatoes in order to get his daily sustenance is tied to the social problem film's syntax, indicating that this boy is poor and destitute and in need of society's intervention. However, in a comic Eastside Kids film like *'Neath Brooklyn Bridge*, this same image of a boy stealing food is attached to the syntax of the comedy and thus bears very different meanings. Rather than indicating that this thief needs to be reformed, this interlude invites the viewer to both marvel and chuckle at the delinquent's mastery of his urban landscape and his ability to outsmart the law and its restrictions. This film, because it is a comedy, does not ask us to ponder why this boy should have to steal, or if he can be reformed, or what his home life might be like. Similarly, in *Boyz N the Hood* the image of Mrs. Baker, rending her clothes and shrieking in pain as she stands over the dead body of her murdered teenage son is heart-wrenching and even difficult to watch; this scene is intended to be disturbing, to drive home the point that the ghetto is a dangerous place and that it is a pressing social problem. We empathize with this mother and lament the state of the world, wondering what can be done to fix it. In *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood*, a ghetto action parody, a similar image is used, but instead of making us weep, it makes us laugh—hard.

How are films able to make this switch? What cues the viewer to laugh rather than cry? In his essay "Horror and Humor" (1999), Noel Carroll explores a similar question, namely to understand how two "broadly implausible affects [horror and humor] can attach to the same stimulus" (145). Of particular interest to my purposes here is Carroll's discussion of how the same semantic cue, the Frankenstein monster, elicits terror in one film, *House of Frankenstein* (1944, Erle C. Kenton), but laughter in another, *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948, Charles Barton). He concludes that one reason for this shift in affect is the

frame or climate created by each film. If the characters being threatened by the Frankenstein monster are “clowns”, that is, indestructible, then the fictional environment is marked as “safe”: “Within the comic frame, though injury, pain and death are often elements in a joke, we are not supposed to dwell on them, especially in terms of their moral or human weight or consequences” (152). Comedy, which Carroll calls an “amoral” genre, does not invite us to feel empathy for the adolescents found in *Neath Brooklyn Bridge* or *Don’t Be a Menace* and so we are able to laugh at them instead. These films’ semantics, like a young boy forced to steal or a murdered teenager, once placed within the comic frame, are suddenly freed of all the serious or weighty obligations of the social problem film. If, for example, getting arrested and thrown into jail or reform school is an event with grave consequences in social problem films like *Dead End*, it is merely another bump along the road to happy resolution in a comedy like *Smart Alecks* (1942, Wallace Fox). Gerald Mast says the comic frame is created through “a series of signs that lets us know the action is taking place in a comic world, that it will be ‘fun’ (even if at some moments it will not be), that we are to enjoy and not worry” (9). Mast argues that this climate can be established through a silly title (*Don’t Be a Menace to South Central while Drinking Your Juice in the Hood*), iconic comic actors or the presence of one-dimensional comic types (Dead End Kids regular Huntz Hall), improbable plots or the reduction of a serious subject to a trivial one (the comic treatment of drug dealing and addicts in *Friday* [1995, F. Gary Gray]), absurdist dialogue (Leo Gorcey’s line, “I ignored my vocabulation as a kid”), self consciousness or artificiality (Keenan Ivory Wayans’ use of direct address in *Don’t Be a Menace*) and finally, film style (9-11). This last point is of particular significance to the ghetto action cycle, which, during its first few years, was shot in a fairly consistent *cinema verité* style, including hand held cameras, long takes, grainy, washed out images, etc. In the comic versions of these films, like *Friday* and *Don’t*

*be a Menace*, the film style more clearly mimics the invisible editing techniques and unobtrusive cinematography associated with most products of classical Hollywood cinema. The use of this invisible style invites the audience to get absorbed into the plot, a series of gags, rather than contemplate the carefully crafted authenticity of the social problem film.

In addition to the establishment of a comic climate I believe that it is the inherently *repetitive* nature of film cycles that allows for this easy transition into other generic climates, particularly comedy. For instance, the two films cited by Carroll, which employ the image of the Frankenstein monster for two very different affects, were each part of long-running film cycles: *House of Frankenstein* was part of Universal's monster cycle and *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* was, of course, part of the Abbott and Costello franchise. The humor of the latter hinges on the immediate recognizability of the monster, the actors and the incongruity of their meeting. But these semantic elements could be redeployed for other syntactic purposes only *after* they have been repeated enough to be recognizable even in a radically different context—this film would not have worked in the same way had this been the first cinematic appearance of the Frankenstein monster. Colin McArthur aptly describes this process of meaning accumulation as the “curious alchemy of the cinema”: “each successive appearance in the genre further solidifies the actor's screen persona until he no longer plays a role but assimilates it to the collective entity made up of his own body and personality and his past screen roles” (24).

While, for example, *Dead End* needed to spend screen time establishing the personalities and backgrounds of the Dead End Kids (i.e., they are poor street urchins, they are uneducated and sassy, etc.), *Boys of the City* (1940, Joseph H. Lewis), released just three years later, jumps right into the plot, confident that viewers are already familiar with the characters and

their basic traits. Likewise, because the repetitiveness of the imagery of these films erased the dialectic between signifier and signified, these images were free to be used for any purpose whatsoever. Jean Baudrillard has argued that without the dialectic between the signifier and the signified, which allows for the accumulation of information and meanings, it is not possible to determine significance, gain knowledge or to place any value on anything: “released from any ‘archaic’ obligation it may have had to designate something, the sign is at last free for a structural or combinatory play that succeeds the previous role of determinate equivalence” (129). Within the world of the simulacrum, images or signs now “exchange among themselves, without interacting with the real” (128), or without an origin in the “real.”<sup>87</sup> Thus the image or sign (the smudge-faced juvenile delinquent in *Boys in the City*), detached from its signified (a poor little child who needs our help), is all surface and no meaning. And this state of meaninglessness is conducive to the all-important comic “shtick,” allowing us to laugh rather than cry.

It is not surprising then, that the majority of the films in Monogram Studio’s successful Eastside Kids cycle<sup>88</sup> initiated in 1940, just after the completion of the first Dead End Kids cycle, retain the basic semantics of the original cycle but are comedies or have comic climates. The Eastside Kids cycle’s transition from the syntax of the social problem film to that of the comedy was facilitated by altering the depressing socioeconomic backgrounds of the boys. In the original cycle the boys’ biological parents were usually only mentioned as individuals who inflicted beatings, got drunk and yelled at their sons. The Eastside Kids cycle, however, takes a decidedly less hostile view towards adults. In *Kid Dynamite* (1943, Wallace Fox), for example,

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<sup>87</sup> Baudrillard also argues that the laws of classical economy, where exchange value is predicated on use value, no longer hold true. These two aspects of value were at one time “coherent and eternally linked,” but now the dialectic between use value and exchange value have broken down. Since value is no longer defined by use or by some referent, it is no longer linked to the “real.” Baudrillard links this dissociation between value and its referent to the dissociation of the sign from the signifier (129-131).

<sup>88</sup> This cycle starred four of the original “Dead End Kids”: Bobby Jordan, Leo Gorcey, Huntz Hall and Gabriel Dell, plus several other youths (including the addition of the aforementioned Scruno).

there are several lengthy scenes which take place in the apartments of both Muggs (Leo Gorcey) and Danny (Bobby Jordan) and there is significant characterization of both of their mothers, while in *Clancy Street Boys* the entire plot revolves around the subject of Muggs' family. In all cases, parents and guardians are depicted in a favorable light. Furthermore, while the Eastside Kids are always strapped for cash, they are not the destitute street urchins of the original Dead End Kids cycle. When it is necessary to don suits in order to participate in a jitterbug contest in *Kid Dynamite* none of the boys have any problem locating one. Furthermore, the gangs' day-to-day outfits, which remain fairly consistent from film to film,<sup>89</sup> have been upgraded from torn, oversized hand me downs to the clean but casual attire of a lower-middle-class teenager. Finally, rather than hanging out on the docks or on someone's front porch, the gang has a clubhouse for which they presumably pay rent (we are told that the Eastside gang charges monthly dues). These changes ease the transition from social problem film to comedy; the boys are freed from their positions as social victims and instead become picaresque heroes, with each film providing them with a new opportunity to showcase their comedic talents. Thus, as in most "clown comedy," or comedies which center on a comic figure or troupe, the Eastside Kids storylines become a "convenience on which the film clown can 'hang' his comic shtick" (Gehring 189). By contrast, the outcome of the social problem film's narrative is *always* significant: will the juvenile be sent to reform school or be given a second chance? In the comedy, the answer to this question is of little to no importance. Thus, in the switch from social problem film to comedy, the significance of the plot is subjugated to the significance of the image or sight gag.

Comedy is also possible in these films because, as I mentioned, each character has become a cliché, an image detached from any origins in the real. Thus when a viewer familiar

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<sup>89</sup> Muggs always wears a "pork pie" hat, Glimpy wears a turned up baseball cap, Danny wears a snug-fitting T-shirt tucked into belted khakis, and Scruno always dons a painter's cap and a button down shirt.

with the cycle sees Huntz Hall s/he knows, even if Hall appears under different names or in wildly different settings, that his character will always be unintelligent, lazy and clumsy. Throughout the course of a film we can expect to hear him mispronounce a word, get smacked by Leo Gorcey and/or fall down. The Eastside Kids cycle also imported clichés from outside of the cycle, to serve as shorthand for various social and political issues. The most interesting and ideologically fraught example of the cycle’s deployment of clichéd images is Scruno, the only African American character to appear in any of the three Dead End Kids spin off cycles. Scruno is an interesting example of this cycle’s deployment of clichés because he is primarily treated like “one of the gang.” He is an equal to his friends (though Muggs is the leader) and the boys’ almost never mention Scruno’s racial difference. However, several times during the course of an Eastside Kids film, Scruno will make an out-of-place, racially charged comment. For example, in *Boys of the City* Scruno is the *only* character to be served a giant hunk of watermelon during a formal dinner, inspiring the line “I don’t like that woman and I don’t like that graveyard, but watermelon is watermelon *anytime!*” He then plunges his entire face into the slice of fruit. Later in the film, when exploring a haunted mansion, Scruno makes a casual reference to the legacy of slavery when he comments “Man I sure do miss that old plantation!” What is most interesting about these moments (and there are many of them) is that they act as disruptions within the narrative: other characters rarely react to Scruno’s one-liners and often his “jokes” are delivered directly before the transition to a new scene, thus denying other characters the opportunity to engage with these comments. The incoherence of these moments, and the narrative’s inability to seamlessly incorporate Scruno and his outbursts of racial difference within the diegesis, highlight’s this cycle’s extradiegetic inability to properly address issues of race.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> I want to thank my colleague, Molly Brown, for making this connection.

Although the original Dead End Kids cycle was consistently identified in public discourses as realistically addressing the problems of underprivileged urban youth, it conspicuously avoided any discussion of the problems of non-white youth. Monogram's apparent corrective to this absence is the addition of Scruno. However, in a film cycle which communicates with its audiences via already familiar screen images, Scruno can only be an image replicating other images of blackness found in mainstream Hollywood films of the time. For example, *Smart Alecks* opens with a scene in which Scruno is dancing in order to raise money for the gang's baseball uniforms. The first image is a high angle, medium shot of a pair of legs tap dancing on a city sidewalk. Offscreen we can hear the sounds of a harmonica playing and a crowd of onlookers enthusiastically cheering on the dance. As the camera tilts up we see that these feet belong to Scruno, and that he is the only black character within the frame (as per usual in this film cycle).<sup>91</sup> While Scruno dances the other members of the Eastside gang goad the crowd of spectators by commenting on Scruno's dancing skill, "That boy gets more and more hep every day" and "Cut that rug, boy!" and panhandling. I have highlighted this moment among the many numerous racial offences which occur in this cycle because it is so clearly a moment in which a familiar screen image—a black dancer performing for the enjoyment of white spectators—is used in order to reference previous screen images.

In moments like these, when Scruno is required to put on a mask of blackness, that is, of already existing racial stereotypes, it is as if the filmmaker feels *obligated* to communicate to his audience in this way. If, as Sander Gilman has noted, "stereotyping is a universal means of coping with anxieties engendered by our inability to control the world" (12),

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<sup>91</sup> In fact, the only time other black characters appear in this cycle is when they are explicitly identified as being one of Scruno's relatives, as if Scruno and his family are the only African Americans living on the Eastside of New York City in the 1940s.

then the deployment of this fixed, stereotyped image of blackness, which denies the possibility of alternate readings or an engagement in contemporary social issues, is a way to alleviate this anxiety. Scruno, as the image of the image of race, alleviates the mental disturbances generated by contemporary racial conflicts but also keeps such images in circulation, highlighting this cycle's attempts to control and defuse race anxieties while simultaneously reflecting contemporary (white) society's understanding of race relations. To treat Scruno's racial difference in any other way would be to engage in a different syntax—that of the social problem film. In fact, in the context of the social problem film, Scruno's racial difference and the problems that difference might generate for his character would have acted as a catalyst for social change or at least awareness. For example, if *Smart Alecks* was a social problem film, as opposed to a comedy/crime caper, then after dancing before the crowd Scruno may have complained about being called “boy” or having to perform alone before a crowd of white spectators, leading to a discussion of contemporary race relations. However in the Eastside Kids cycle, Scruno, as an image detached from any basis in reality, only inspires passivity and unchanging acceptance of the contemporary racial climate.

By contrast, the ghetto action cycle is almost wholly preoccupied with the effects of race and racism; if class-based strife is the Dead End Kids cycle's *raison d'être* then race-based strife is the ghetto action cycle's. But this syntax, too, changes over time. The original ghetto action film cycle (1991-1996), while it did not spawn any lengthy comedic cycles in the vein of the Eastside Kids, Little Tough Guys and the Bowery Boys cycles, it did produce several comedies, and later, low budget direct to DVD releases. Like the Dead End Kids cycle, the ghetto action cycle originates with plots that are as far from comedy as possible: in *Fresh*, for example, the preteen protagonist watches as the object of his childhood crush slowly dies from a

bullet lodged in her neck, while in *South Central* 10-year-old Jimmie is shot in the back with buckshot during a robbery attempt, to name just a few disturbing scenes. S. Craig Watkins explains that “many of the filmmakers who contributed to the cycle saw the films as a way to engage, if not reshape, popular debates about the lived experiences of ghetto youth (*Genres* 243). How is it possible then, that these films which once “wrestled with some of the most prominent issues...associated with the changing state of poor youth and the communities they inhabited” (Watkins *Genres* 243) eventually evolved into comedies? Again, the repetition of certain images—the gangsta, the confused crack cocaine addict, the welfare mother— all of which were positioned as either the causes or the effects of institutional racism, lost their ability to convey their original, serious syntax over time. This process was no doubt aided by the mainstream acceptance and exploitation of rap and hip hop culture, especially by white middle class teens, who began to adopt the style, speech and postures of the filmic and rap gangsta (a phenomenon I discuss in detail in Chapter 3), which further emptied these images of their original political significance.

The first mainstream film to plug the semantics of the ghetto action film into a comic climate is F. Gary Gray’s 1995 release *Friday*.<sup>92</sup> This film contains the primary semantics of the ghetto action cycle. The film is set in a South Central Los Angeles neighborhood, stars Ice Cube (an icon of the cycle), and replicates various plot formulas from the original cycle. For example, when the film begins Craig (Ice Cube) has just been fired from his job, which impacts

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<sup>92</sup> I should point out here that I am skipping over two earlier examples of parody within this cycle: the gangsta rap “mockumentaries” *CB4* (1993, Tamra Davis) and *Fear of a Black Hat* (1994, Rusty Cundieff). These films counteract much of the “serious” impact of the figure of the gangsta rapper (though not necessarily the ghetto action cycle) through their extreme self reflexivity. However, because these films specifically parody gangsta rap, which had only gained mainstream acceptance in the early 1990s, only a select segment of film going audience, hardcore gangsta rap fans and music industry insiders, would have truly understood all of the films’ jokes. Thus it is not surprising that white middle class critics, like *The Washington Post*’s Hal Hinson and *The Chicago Sun-Times*’ Roger Ebert, were somewhat puzzled by these films.

his ability to help pay his parent's rent. In previous entries in the ghetto action cycle this situation would most certainly lead to tragic consequences; either Craig's family would be evicted from their house or Craig, desperate to make money, would commit a criminal act, leading to his (violent) undoing. However, in *Friday* the loss of his job merely frees Craig to get into several comic situations with his ne'er-do-well companion Smokey (Chris Tucker). At the same time, Smokey, a smalltime pot dealer, is in trouble because he smoked all of the marijuana that he was supposed to be selling for the local drug kingpin, Big Worm (Faizon Love). In earlier entries in the ghetto action cycle this predicament would have resulted in serious bodily harm for Smokey, but in this comedy such a situation allows for a plot in which Craig and Smokey scramble to come up with the needed cash by the end of the day. Because *Friday* establishes its comic climate early on (with one-dimensional comic types, absurdist dialogue and the use of a classical Hollywood style) we never truly fear that Craig or Smokey will be seriously harmed.

One year later the Wayans brothers released the ghetto action parody *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood*, a film which, according to S. Craig Watkins, "signaled both the popularity and waning appeal of one of the most intriguing film production trends of the 1990s...it suggested that the narrative strategies, conventions and formulae that made up the cycle had become predictable, worn and clichéd" (236). While the move to comedy is often the first sign that a film cycle's semantics are available for use in other genres, the appearance of a parody indicates that these images have reached the end of their usefulness, of their ability to communicate with the audience in the same manner as they originally did. As its title indicates, the film directly parodies the images, plots and themes from ghetto action films like *Boyz N the Hood*, *New Jack City*, *Juice*, *South Central* and *Menace II Society*, as well as similarly themed "message" films about contemporary race relations directed

by John Singleton (*Poetic Justice* [1993] and *Higher Learning* [1995]) and Spike Lee (*Do the Right Thing* [1989]).

The film opens with the statement “1 out of every 10 black males will be forced to sit through at least one ‘Growing Up in the ‘Hood’ movie in their lifetime. At least 1 out of 5 will be shot in the theater while watching the movie.” While intended to mock a similar square up which opened *Boyz N the Hood*, this statement also acknowledges the pervasiveness of the conventions of the ghetto action film in the American cinematic imagination as well as the media-hyped violence surrounding them.<sup>93</sup> These titles are then followed by a series of images made familiar through their repetition in the ghetto action cycle: an aerial shot of a Los Angeles suburb, populated with small stucco homes; a close up of a street sign (a stop sign with the words “I wouldn’t STOP if I was you”), and a young, black male narrator who tells us “I’m gonna tell you how it is in the hood.” When this teenage narrator finishes this statement, he is shot in the back of the head, keels over and dies. This moment of sudden violence is, at first, a direct quote from the ghetto action cycle. Violence is random and senseless in the original cycle, signaling how dangerous life in the ‘hood can be. But this moment is rendered comic by the fact that his killer then steps forward—rather than running away to avoid the cops—and explains “Nah it ain’t like that. I’m gonna tell you the real deal about the way it goes down in the hood. You see, in the hood, most of us won’t reach the age of 21.” Soon another young male enters the frame, not with a gun, but with a birthday cake topped with a candle in the shape of the number “21.” This scene is comic because a moment of expected violence is replaced with a lighter moment. But before this killer/narrator can blow out his candles he too is shot and killed. We should not be too surprised at this event, however, since we had just been warned that most hood residents

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<sup>93</sup> See Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of the violence that broke out at screenings of *New Jack City*, *Boyz N the Hood* and *Juice*.

do not live to be twenty-one. Before we can laugh at this gag, however, a middle-aged woman, wearing a head full of curlers and a house dress (both signifiers of the cinematic welfare mom established in earlier ghetto action films like *Boyz N the Hood*), rushes into the frame, throws herself over the boy's bloody body and laments "My baby! My baby!" The music becomes tense and melodramatic as she wails, signaling the seriousness of the event; that is, this moment is serious until the friend holding the birthday cake kneels down beside the grieving mother to inform her "This ain't your baby." The woman lifts up the dead boy's head, examines it briefly and finally remarks "Oh. Ain't that some shit?" and drops his head with a plop. This move once again cues the viewer that it is okay to laugh at these images; even the melodramatic music stops playing the moment the boy's head hits the pavement. The scene implies that ghetto action films are populated with so many identical, young black "gangsta" characters that their own mothers cannot tell them apart. While the Wayans brothers (who wrote, co-produced and starred in the film) are famous for their ability to lampoon popular culture, their film is also a specific attack on the clichés which circulate in and around the ghetto action film. By placing these floating signifiers of urban menace and tragedy within a comic climate, the film's creators are pointing to the inadequacy of these images to signify the reality of life in the contemporary ghetto. This film, despite its surface frivolity, is a commentary on the representation of black characters on film in the 1990s.<sup>94</sup>

So what exactly does a parody like *Don't Be a Menace* mean for the images and themes of the ghetto action cycle? The appearance of a film parody acknowledges that a particular cultural product has fully saturated the *majority* of the film going audience (i.e., the

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<sup>94</sup> In an interview with Cynthia Fuchs, Marlon Wayans explained that "I think that everyone has their own medicine, and comedy is ours. We come from a place where it's better to laugh at something than cry. *Don't Be a Menace* had a lot of social statements, but we made them with jokes."

mainstream). To laugh at this film is to recognize its images *as* ineffective clichés. Indeed, John Cawelti argues that the presence of parody signals “the tendency of genres to exhaust themselves, to our growing historical awareness of modern popular culture, and finally, to the decline of the underlying mythology on which traditional genres have been based” (200). The release of the Wayans’ parody also changed the course of the ghetto action cycle, making it impossible for filmmakers to use images of angry young “gangstas” telling viewers “how it is in the ‘hood” without a certain degree of self consciousness. The mythology underlying the first entries in the ghetto action cycle, that showing black youth shooting each other and dying on screen could generate awareness about the plight of inner city youth and consequently lead to social change, had disintegrated by 1996. *Don’t Be a Menace* thus exposes the inadequacies of the ghetto action cycle by presenting the audience with familiar images that play into and disrupt our understanding of what is or is not indicative of a “serious” social problem film. Dan Harries argues that a film parody “embraces and often perpetuates the very codes it is spoofing—generating more or less a ‘blueprint’ of the targeted genre by laying bare the genre’s structure and conventions” (281-282). *Don’t Be a Menace* pulls these images out of their emotional contexts and exposes them to the harsh light of parody, revealing just how clichéd and inaccurate they have become.

Cawelti also believes that the appearance of a parody indicates that a genre has reached a point of creative exhaustion and is inadequate to the needs of contemporary society. While I agree that a parody signals the exhaustion of *certain* semantic elements in a genre or cycle, I do not believe that they signal the *end* of a genre’s or cycle’s cultural relevance. Certainly, the American public was still concerned about the plight of inner city youth in the mid-1990s, even if that concern became the butt of *Don’t Be a Menace*’s jokes. I agree more

with Dan Harries' claim that parody both "situates and subverts the viewing experience," thus facilitating the perpetuation of a genre in a revised form (Harries 282). For example, one scene in *Don't Be a Menace* in which the protagonists go to visit their friend, Malik (Omar Epps), at college is a direct quote of John Singleton's *Higher Learning* (even the actor and his character's name are the same). The boys congratulate Malik for making it out of the 'hood and he replies "Yeah, looks like there *is* hope." He is then immediately shot down by a sniper, who turns out to be "The Man," the metonymic figure often invoked in ghetto action films as the root of most social ills.<sup>95</sup> Here the film makes visible two aspects of the ghetto action cycle's "blueprint": that the problems of the ghetto can always be blamed on an antagonistic white society and that just when we think a character might actually make it "out of the 'hood" he will be shot down in a cruel twist of fate. While these two ghetto action film conventions had a resonance early in the ghetto action cycle, by 1996 audiences had seen them enough that their original power had dissipated with overuse, becoming trite. The problem was not so much the articulation of the idea, but the way in which that idea is expressed to (and "solved" for) the audience. Thus, while a parody is not *necessary* for an audience to recognize a cycle's imagery as trite or overused (as we witnessed in the Dead End Kids cycle—if an image is repeated enough it will exhaust itself no matter what), a parody does speed the process along considerably. It could be argued that a parody "weeds out" clichéd conventions "in order to allow for the canon's continued healthy growth," reconfiguring the cycle while "embracing core generic elements" (Harries 287), thereby forcing a cycle to use its semantics in a new way. This last point is significant. Parodies do not "kill" a genre or cycle, rather their presence indicates that there is yet something compelling in

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<sup>95</sup> "The Man" even holds a piece of paper that reads "Brothers who are trying to make it out of the 'hood: Ricky, Caine, Malik, Radio Raheem." All of the targets (with the exception of Malik) are the names of characters who were killed in the films *Boyz N Hood*, *Menace II Society* and *Do the Right Thing*.

the text being lampooned. Audiences who chose to see *Don't Be a Menace*—and many did (it earned \$8.1 million in its opening weekend)—were still intrigued by the ghetto action film.

Consequently, it is not surprising that after the release of *Don't Be a Menace* in January of 1996, the ghetto action film continues to be produced. F. Gary Gray releases *Set it Off* in November of that year, but Gray's film revolves around four women, telling the familiar ghetto action story from a uniquely female point of view. By switching the gender of the protagonists' perspective, the ghetto action cycle's semantics and syntactics can be usefully taken up again. *Original Gangstas* (1996, Larry Cohen) also provides a twist on the ghetto action cycle formula, by pitting icons of the blaxploitation cycle (including Pam Grier, Fred Williamson, Jim Brown, Richard Roundtree and Ron O'Neal), the “original gangstas” of the title, against teenage gangstas who threaten to overrun their economically depressed neighborhood with crime and drugs. This alteration of the traditional ghetto action film blueprint allows *Original Gangstas* to once again attempt social commentary.<sup>96</sup> Other than these two releases, the ghetto action film is virtually absent in the later part of the 1990s, except in the form of comedies taking a light or parodic stance towards the ghetto action blueprint: *High School High* (1996, Hart Bochner) (a parody of *Dangerous Minds* [1995, John Smith]), *White Boyz* (1999, Marc Levin) (white Midwestern teenagers who dream of becoming gangsta rappers), *Next Friday* (2000, Steve Carr) and *Friday After Next* (2002, Marcus Raboy) (both are sequels to *Friday*), *The Wash* (2001, DJ Pooh) (a remake of *Carwash* [1976, Michael Schultz]), and *Barbershop* (2002, Tim Story). The success of *Barbershop* led to two sequels, *Barbershop 2: Back in Business* (2004, Kevin Rodney Sullivan) the all-female cast *Beauty Shop* (2005, Billie Woodruff), and a Showtime television series, *Barbershop* (2005). The success of these comedies

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<sup>96</sup> See Chapter 3 for an analysis of this film.

indicates that mainstream audiences are willing to engage with ghetto action films as long as they appear in a significantly altered form, such as the comedy.

### **2.2.2 Generic Hybrids, Timely Topics and Low Budget Filmmaking**

As I have just demonstrated, once a film cycle's semantics are incapable of conveying their initial syntax, images must be either be revised (such as the use of female gangstas in *Set it Off*) or attached to a new syntax (such as the comedy) in order to continue to generate a box office. However, while comedy is the most common mode taken up by a dying film cycle, any stable genre or cycle will do the trick. Here I am using the word "stable" to refer to long-established genres whose popularity remains fairly consistent throughout film history (even if this popularity waxes and wanes), such as the comedy, the Western, the gangster film, the musical and the horror film. I am also using "stable" to refer to the periodic bankability of certain film cycles (i.e., the self-reflexive teen slasher cycle of the mid- to late 1990s initiated by the financial success of *Scream* [1996, Wes Craven]) or even a generalized sentiment, such as the predictable resurgence of patriotism during times of war. Combining the proven money-making elements of a faltering film cycle with the proven money making elements of one or several different genres or cycles also ensures that studios can appeal to the widest segment of the audience with just one product. As Rick Altman puts it "studios are like candidates for political office, above all concerned to avoid alienating any particular group of voters" (128).

Attaching the unmoored semantics of a drowning cycle to a more stable genre or cycle, or to a timely topic or sentiment, is a way to extend a cycle's cultural relevance and thus squeeze more revenue out of it. This process explains why film cycles never completely disappear or "die." Traces of a cycle's images and themes continue to circulate throughout films

and when they stop appearing on the big screen they can still be located in other forms of visual media like television shows, music videos, video games and comics. In particular, the clichéd material of a dying film cycle often finds a welcoming home in the context of the B-film. The terms variously attributed to B films, like “quickies,” “cheapies” or simply, “low budget,” “imply pictures that were regarded as secondary even in their own time, and the ‘B’ label has often been used to imply minor pictures or simply poor filmmaking, anything tacky or produced on a low budget” (Taves 313). And yet, during the reign of the studio system, “big budget” pictures were the exception while B films were the rule; approximately 75% of films made during the 1930s fall under the category of the B film (Taves 313). Despite their lowly cultural status, B films not only kept studios in business, their ability to consistently generate profits indicates that audiences were paying money to watch these films (Taves 315). Nevertheless, the B film was frequently ignored by reviewers and for a long time, by the field of film studies, based on the belief that they were formulaic, poorly made, lacked recognizable stars and were therefore unworthy of the attention bestowed on their glossier “A” counterparts.<sup>97</sup> In fact “The patterns of film distribution and exhibition functioned according to the assumption that B films did not merit and could not support the kind of attention which the studios routinely tried to drum up for the As” (Jacobs 8). It would appear, then, that the B film’s bald goal of profit-making, of cutting corners in order to ensure that studios had enough cash to finance more “important” ventures, renders them too far from the realm of art, and therefore, serious consideration. Despite their lack of stars or glossy production values, the B film, like the classical exploitation film, was often able to address topics that the A pictures had to avoid for

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<sup>97</sup> Of course, the line between A and B fare was not always that clear. Some B films might be released as A pictures if they received favorable reviews or if one of its unknown actors achieved recent fame. Likewise, if a more expensive A picture turned out to be a dud, it might be released as a B feature (that is, as the second half of a double bill) (Taves 315).

fear of alienating portions of its broad audience. Furthermore, the B's budgetary constraints forced them to engage with a more mundane, everyday world than the "dream worlds" which appeared in most major studio fare (with the exception of Warner Brothers): "With their less ornate costumes and sets, and secondary stars, B's center more on day-to-day living, and their themes arguably constitute a better cultural and political reflection of the time" (Taves 335). In this way it could be argued that the B film was truly the cinema of the people: addressing their desires and holding a mirror up to their contemporary situations.

Film cycles thrive in a low budget, B-film environment because much of the work (and therefore the costs) have been completed before the characters ever reach the screen—the actors know their motivations from previous films, the script writers have written for these characters in previous scripts and even certain sets and plotlines can be easily reconstructed. The overused semantic elements of a dying film cycle, each carrying their own detailed back stories, are welcome in low budget films that rely heavily on an economy of action. Therefore it should not be surprising that most examples of the ghetto action formula now appear in the direct to DVD (or D2D) release, the B films of today. In *More Than Night* (1998) James Naremore draws a similar connection between B-film noirs of the 1950s and the campy, highly sexual direct-to-video mystery thrillers of the 1990s (161-166). Naremore suspects that the latter did well because they catered to the desires of their target audience, who wanted to see more pornography and less narrative (162); the D2D releases of the 2000s perform the same function, namely providing their audiences with more of the product they hunger for, namely ghetto action influenced films, even if the writing and acting is often sub par.

Despite their proliferation over the past twenty years, D2D films are rarely reviewed in mainstream publications (though there are internet sites devoted to such releases,

like Yourvideostoreshelf.com, Bad Cinema Diary, etc.) and are almost wholly absent from academic discourse.<sup>98</sup> In many ways the silence about D2D releases mirrors the way that B-films were once treated, by both the industry and by film studies. D2D films are stigmatized for two primary reasons. First is their subject matter. Direct to DVD releases have typically been the province of two film genres which rarely receive serious critical attention from the academy: children's movies and pornography. Furthermore, as Linda Ruth Williams argues in her book length study of the erotic thriller, "The VCR amplifies and individualizes the association of movies with sex" because the very concept of the home video or DVD implies a solitary, if not illicit, viewing situation (255). Films we would not be willing to see in a public place (such as pornography) can be safely viewed in the privacy of the home. I would add that the decision to view a film on video or DVD, rather than in the theater, also implies a lack of urgency or desire on the part of the viewer, and therefore, is a value judgment on the film itself. Certain films, particularly big budgeted "event" pictures with plenty of special effects, like the *Lord of the Rings* (2001, 2002, 2003, Peter Jackson) or *Spiderman* (2002, 2004, 2007, Sam Raimi) trilogies almost demand a theatrical viewing experience. So by extension, a film which never makes it into the theaters is usually understood to be a film which the producers believe to be either too explicit or too insignificant to warrant a trip to a public theater on behalf of the audience.

This point leads me to the second reason for why D2D releases rarely receive any mainstream press or critical interest—their low budget status. Unlike mainstream theatrical releases, which are presumed to have taken time and care in their production, the D2D release is constructed with the bare minimum materials: simple sets, unknown or "washed up" actors and

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<sup>98</sup> At the time of this writing, the only academic texts to mention to direct to video or direct to DVD releases were a few pages in James Naremore's *More than Night* and a chapter in Linda Ruth Williams' *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema*.

directors, and hastily composed, plodding scripts. As with the classical exploitation film and the B film, the D2D release must compensate for the poverty of its image through some other redeeming factor, some exploitable hook. In the case of the D2D film, this hook is often sex, but may be also *any* sensational element, such as gore, violence, or perversity. The main difference, however, between the classical exploitation film and the D2D release is that today there is no Production Code prohibiting the exhibition of such sensations in mainstream releases. All of the “sensational” topics addressed by the classical exploitation film, including venereal disease, sexual promiscuity and drug abuse,<sup>99</sup> are now standard film subjects. Mainstream, big budgeted, star studded releases can address formerly taboo topics like homosexuality (*Broke Back Mountain* [2005, Ang Lee]), extreme violence (*Kill Bill* [2003, Quentin Tarantino]), and casual sex (*The 40-Year-Old Virgin* [2005, Judd Apatow]) with only a small amount of controversy (which is welcomed and used), so what exactly, does the D2D film have to offer its viewer? Here again we see a parallel with the B film; the D2D release can cater to a specific demographic that remains underserved by the majority of theatrical releases.

The ghetto action cycle has found new life in the D2D format precisely because the themes and subjects it addresses are no longer a viable commodity in the realm of theatrical releases; mainstream movie going audiences will no longer pay to see these films. However, black audiences, considered by the industry to be a “niche audience,” are still interested in these type of films, and so producers have created entire “urban” departments, the term D2D producers have euphemistically applied to black urban audiences, to address this community. Often these films, which run the gamut from black cast comedies, horror films, erotic thrillers and of course, ghetto action films, are direct rip offs of successful mainstream releases and/or a series of

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<sup>99</sup> For a more detailed discussion of exploitation films, see Chapter 4.

“sequels” to previously successful D2D titles. Again this overt desire to satisfy the consumer, to provide a specific, niche product, is what gives these films their “low brow” status. Williams believes that for this reason the D2D and direct-to-TV films are the “supreme American genre product: recognizable instances of alike substitutions, repetitions which ring a few character and plot changes but retain a brand identity” (Williams 366).

When Warner Brothers exhausted the narrative and thematic possibilities of the Dead End Kids cycle after seven films, Universal and Monogram Studios took the characters (and the actors who played them), images and settings and applied them to a different syntax. We see this pattern in Monogram’s aforementioned “Eastside Kids” cycle. While these B films do address, if only implicitly, the lower class origins of the boys and the problems created by growing up poor, their main storylines usually classify them as something *other* than social problem films. This move into new (and often multiple) generic climates allows filmmakers to continue to exploit a familiar, money-making concept, the personas developed in the original Dead End Kids cycle, while simultaneously providing audiences with the novelty of new storylines: *Boys of the City* is a comic “murder mystery,” *Ghosts on the Loose* is a comic horror film, *Kid Dynamite*, *Bowery Blitzkrieg* (1941, Wallace Fox) and *Come Out Fighting* (1945, William Beaudine) are sports or boxing movies, *Flying Wild* (1941, William West) and *Spooks Run Wild* (1941, Phil Rosen) and are spy stories. Attaching some of the most recognizable semantics of the original cycle (the Kids, the Brooklyn setting, the boys’ delinquent antics and moneymaking schemes, etc.) with another genre’s semantics and syntax also streamlines the filmmaking process. Monogram understood that the presence of the Dead End Kids in a film would sell tickets so all they needed to do was plug those characters into new contexts and slightly varied plots in order to keep the audience paying. In *Spooks Run Wild*, for example,

Monogram simply took its stock characters and inserted them into the established framework of the horror film. In a repetition of the basic plot structure of *They Made Me a Criminal* and *Boys of the City*, the kids are sent to a mountain camp, as an alternative to reform school, which is currently being terrorized by the much feared “Monster Killer.” Here we have two primary semantic elements of the original Dead End Kids cycle: the Kids and the convention of the reformatory, albeit in an altered form. The film also contains some of the primary semantics of the horror film: a creepy mansion, several red herring suspects, and horror icon, Bela Lugosi (who at this point in his career was slumming it in B pictures to support a nasty morphine habit). This film spawned a sequel of sorts, *Ghosts on the Loose* (also starring Bela Lugosi) and has the kids roaming around what they believe to be a haunted house, only this Eastside Kids entry also manages to tie in a wedding and Nazi spy plot, bringing its generic count to four (social problem film, comedy, horror film and war propaganda). This process of genre swapping ensured that there were an endless amount of plotlines for the Dead End Kids beyond the world of the Bowery, stretching the cycle’s appeal to the widest swath of audience.<sup>100</sup>

As the Eastside Kids cycle evolved further and further from its roots in the social problem film, it needed to find other ways to connect with audiences; thus, many of the plots in the Eastside Kids cycle, a series which ran during the whole of the United States’ involvement in World War II (1941-1945), revolve around patriotic, pro-war storylines. Because the Eastside Kids films had very short production schedules (between five and seven days) and were shot close to their release dates, their topics were extremely timely. This quick turnaround was the

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<sup>100</sup> These films and their repetitive nature had so penetrated the public imagination that they became fodder for jokes. For example, in a 1943 review of *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (Roy William Neill), Bosley Crowther, always a fan of the Eastside Kids, ended his piece with the following thought “Universal will have to try again [to make a better movie]. Only next time we have a suggestion: why not unite with Monogram and turn out a horror to end all horrors—”Wolf Man and Monster Meet the Eastside Kids”?” (8).

one of the few advantages that Poverty Row studios like Monogram and Republic had over the Big Five Studios. They could take an event, such as new developments in World War II, and turn it into a film plot while the news was still at the forefront of the public's mind. *Pride of the Bowery* (1941, Joseph H. Lewis) is a particularly fascinating example of this cycle's ability to capitalize on current events. Released in January of 1941, *Pride of the Bowery* takes place at a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp, which were in service from 1933-1942. The film is essentially like an advertisement for the continuation of the program, which was deprioritized as a result of the war-generated increase in employment for young men ("Civilian Conservation Camps"). For example, during their first meal at the camp, the boys eagerly gorge themselves while one of them exclaims "Can you believe we get all this and they *pay* you for it?" Likewise, Muggs, a character who is normally defined by a preternatural resistance to authority, evolves from a cocky tough to an obedient cadet over the course of the sixty-two minute film.

Although Monogram Studios, like all studios at the time, was "encouraged" the Office of War Information (O.W.I.) to use their films as "a means of propaganda to achieve [the government's] military and diplomatic objectives" (Murphy 59), a more likely explanation for the film's pro-camp message is the timeliness of the story and the studio's desire to appear pro-American at a time when patriotism defined the nation. Indeed, many Poverty Row studios, whose chief market was middle America, the South and the Southwest, created films infused with so-called "traditional values" like "patriotism, conservatism, self-reliance and justice" (Dick 46). What is especially interesting about *Pride of the Bowery* is that images, like the boys digging ditches in the hot sun, had they appeared in the original Dead End Kids cycle, would be attached to an entirely different syntax. Back breaking work in social problem films like *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* or *Crime School* is an indicator of exploitation and social injustice.

Hard labor, when imposed by a figure of authority, is something to fight against, not embrace. Yet in *Pride of the Bowery*, this kind of work is patriotic, “American,” and capable of turning useless juvenile delinquents into model citizens (which was the original goal of the CCC camps). Furthermore, it appears that the cycle’s turn to patriotism had a positive effect on its reviews. While *The New York Times* had taken to bashing the East Side Kids cycle for its formulaic plots and one-dimensional characters, it said this about *Pride of the Bowery*: “Some of the curse of triteness is removed from the tale by the unpretentious and straight-forward manner in which it has been projected” (T.S. 15).

Much as gangsters, who were banished from the big screen in the late 1930s for their unassimilable Otherness, were enlisted in service of the Allied cause in 1940s films like *Lucky Jordan* (1942, Frank Tuttle) and *All Through the Night* (1942, Vincent Sherman), the Eastside Kids films released leading up to and during World War II function to recuperate the deviants of the Dead End Kids cycle back into back into the warm embrace of the nation and its hegemony. Whereas *Dead End* addresses the social problem of juvenile poverty and finds no solution for the boys’ destitution and delinquency, *Pride of the Bowery* addresses a similar problem but is able to offer up a believable “solution”: nationalist zeal and hard work. Thus the Eastside Kids cycle (as well as Universal’s “The Dead End Kids and Little Tough Guys” cycle)<sup>101</sup> effectively taps into the national project of uniting the population behind the war effort and of glossing over individual differences in an effort to present a united American front. Even

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<sup>101</sup> Universal’s Dead End Kids spin-off, “The Dead End Kids and Little Tough Guys” cycle (1938-1943), also used the popularity of the Dead End Kids cycle to sell cheaply made films and serials with action-packed, interchangeable plots. The first “Junior G-Men” serial (1940, Ford Beebe and John Rawlins) has the boys joining forces with the FBI in order to hunt down a terrorist organization, clearly modeled on the growing public apprehension over Adolph Hitler’s actions in Europe, known as “Order of the Flaming Torch.” Likewise, *Keep ‘Em Slugging* (1943, Christy Cabanne) centers its plot around the boys’ decision to get jobs so that draft-age men will be free to fight in the war, inspiring one of the boys to say, “We’re not old enough to fly a bomber, drive a tank or man a machine gun. We all know there’s a war going on. Get legitimate jobs! Keep things moving over here.”

Scruno's racial difference is eradicated when he joins the boys is terrorizing the country's *new* Other, the Japanese saboteur.

In *Lets Get Tough!* (1942, Wallace Fox) for example, the boy's finally discover a useful outlet for their normally menacing delinquency—terrorizing the Japanese residents living in their community. After watching a military parade stirs the boys' national pride, they head to the recruiter's office, only to discover that they are too young to enlist. Determined to do their part for the Allied cause, they decide to “teach a lesson” to a grumpy antiques dealer, Mr. Keno, whom they assume is Japanese (we find out later he is Chinese, an ally as opposed to an enemy). At one point in the film, the boys threaten Mr. Keno *en masse* and pelt him with racially inflected insults. Muggs threatens to turn the innocent antiques dealer into “chop suey,” but then reconsiders, reasoning that Keno is probably “too yellow” to make good chop suey. Scruno sees nothing wrong with making assumptions about Keno's character based solely on his skin color, and, as result, successfully blends in with the rest of the group. In fact, *Pride of the Bowery* is one of the few Eastside Kids films that *does not* single Scruno out based on his racial difference—they have bigger fish to fry. After this heated altercation, Danny, often typecast as the wishy-washy or “sensitive” member of the gang, questions whether they should be terrorizing Keno based solely on his ethnicity. But Muggs explains to him “Its open season on Japs!” which duly convinces Danny. The entire film's plot is based upon the then-popular notion<sup>102</sup> that every Japanese American is a saboteur working for the Japanese government.<sup>103</sup> This film also exploits public awareness of Executive Order 9066, signed by President Roosevelt on February 19, 1942 (three months before the release of this film), which resulted in

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<sup>102</sup> Films like *We've Never Been Licked* (1943, John Rawlins) and *Betrayal from the East* (1945, William A. Berke), among others, implied that Japanese Americans were aware of the plot to bomb Pearl Harbor (Dick 230-232).

<sup>103</sup> Therefore it is not surprising that the Japanese community objected to this film and television stations in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Las Vegas refused to play it (Hayes and Walker 67).

the compulsory internment of 120,000 Japanese residents, two-thirds of which were American citizens with no record of subversive behavior (Burton ix). The quick turn over of these films enabled Monogram to capitalize on timely issues of interest to the American public (the relocation of Japanese residents began just one month before the film hit theaters). Again, this support of government policies is probably less a reflection of the studio's patriotic spirit than it was an attempt to create films reflecting, reinforcing and capitalizing upon contemporary public opinion.<sup>104</sup> Monogram was also on target with the rest of Hollywood, which, by the spring of 1942, began loading its films with anti-Japanese sentiments (Dick 230).

Many Eastside Kids films also create plots out of the boys' desire or lack of desire (which is always rectified) to join the fight against the Axis powers. Not surprisingly, this "awakening the neutral" plotline was a common theme in WWII-era cinema: "Some were unregenerate; those Hollywood scorned just as Dante did. But the cocky, brash loner was something else; he could change. Since apathy was the underside of involvement, it was merely a matter of reversing a position, rather than assuming a new one" (Dick 165). *Kid Dynamite* is a great example of the "awakening of the neutral" plotline. Throughout the film Muggs, a jobless loafer, is depicted as being clueless about current events and what it means to be an American. Halfway through the film, while Muggs is playing pool, a distraught Czech boy runs into the local pool hall to show a newspaper headline to the hall's owner, Nick (Charles Judels). The headline, which reads "Peaceful Czech Town Wiped Out by Nazis: Male Population Face Firing Squad; Women and Children Held in Concentration Camps," is likely a reference to a wholesale massacre in the small Czech village of Lidice, which took place in June of 1942, approximately seven months before the film's release. The introduction of this piece of news elicits a lengthy

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<sup>104</sup> For example, General John L DeWitt, head of the West Coast Defense Command was quoted as saying "A Jap's a Jap...It makes no difference whether he is an American or not...I don't want any of them" (qtd. in Renov 101).

lecture from Nick about the Bill of Rights and what it means to be an American citizen (he is currently studying to be a citizen). As in the social problem film, this focus on the “message with a capital M” brings the film to a standstill. Even the normally loquacious Muggs becomes silent, nodding and lowering his eyes as Nick explains why “our boys are joining the army.” Not surprisingly, Muggs is convinced to enlist.

Thus while in the original Dead End Kids cycle the boys’ problems are eradicated through the intervention of an “exceptional” individual, capable of righting society’s wrongs on a case by case basis, World War II provided studios with a solution satisfying the needs of the narrative, which requires the boys’ recuperation, and a solution satisfying the needs of the nation, which required patriotism and unity. Though a character like Muggs was a true social outsider in the original Dead End Kids cycle, an Other who could not be reformed or recuperated, in *Kid Dynamite* he is recognized as an American, as “one of us.” At one point during his patriotic speech Nick assures Muggs he does not need to memorize the Bill of Rights (although Nick, as an illegal alien, *must* do this in order to obtain his American citizenship). Rather, by virtue of being an American, Muggs has supposedly internalized the concepts of freedom and protection; “Americans are born with [the Bill of Rights] in their hearts,” Nick tells Muggs. The film concludes with Muggs, Danny and Glimpy decked out in Navy, Army and Marine uniforms (respectively), meeting up with the other four Eastside Kids, who are collecting scrap metal for the war effort (they are one year too young to join the armed forces). All seven Eastside Kids have happily found their purpose—as American heroes—which is a far cry from their days of spitting at doormen, robbing their social betters and taunting the elderly in the original Dead End Kids cycle.

Much as the unmoored semantics of the Dead End Kids cycle found new homes in the syntax of more stable genres and cycles, or by exploiting current events, the semantics of the ghetto action cycle began to appear in various (often mixed) generic contexts after their initial exhaustion in 1996 (marked most conspicuously by the release of *Don't Be a Menace to South Central while Drinking Your Juice in the Hood*). There are horror films (*Tales from the Hood* [1995, Rusty Cundieff], *The Horrible Dr. Bonz* [2000, Ted Nicolaou], *Bones* [2001, Ernest R. Dickerson], *Hood of the Living Dead* [2004, Ed Quiroz]), science fiction/horror hybrids (*Leprechaun 5: Leprechaun in the Hood* [2000, Rob Spera], *Leprechaun 6: Back 2 tha Hood* [2003, Steve Ayromlooi]), Westerns<sup>105</sup> (Jean-Claude La Marre's "trilogy" of *Gang of Roses* [2003], *Brothas in Arms* [2005] and *Ride or Die* [2005]), teenpics (*You Got Served* [2004, Chris Stokes], *Love Don't Cost a Thing* [2003, Troy Beyer]), and the burgeoning cycle of the "rise of the working class rapper" biopic (*8 Mile* [2002, Curtis Hanson], *Hustle and Flow* [2005, Craig Brewer], *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* [2005, Jim Sheridan]), among others.

*Tales from the Hood* is a productive place to start this discussion of generic hybrids because, released at the tail end of the ghetto action cycle's viability, it is one of the first films to attempt to refresh the ghetto action formula by bending the semantics and syntax of the horror film to the social problem syntax of the ghetto action film. The film's gangstas are not simply plugged into the horror format (as we saw in the Dead End Kids cycle); rather, the horrors of the film stem directly from the world of the ghetto action cycle. The film is framed by a narrative in which three young gangstas go to a funeral home in order to pick up a drug shipment. Before they are given their package, however, the eccentric mortician, Mr. Simms (Clarence Williams III), insists that the boys listen to four different stories of supernatural

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<sup>105</sup> One ghetto action film-inflected Western was released prior to 1996, Mario Van Peebles' *Posse* (1993).

occurrences in their neighborhood, a format borrowed from the successful *Tales from the Crypt* cycle (1972, 1973, 1995, 1996) and the long running HBO series (1989-1996) of the same name. At the end of the film, as in the original *Tales from the Crypt* (1972, Freddie Francis), the young gangstas realize that they are already dead, the victims, significantly, of black on black crime. The film's tagline acknowledges this hybridization of genres and the film's mixture of the fantastic (horror) and the realistic (ghetto action film): "Your most terrifying nightmare and your most frightening reality are about to meet on the streets." This tagline points to the necessity of altering a faltering cycle's basic blueprint by facilitating the "meeting" of the cycle's most effective semantics and syntax: "terror" plus "reality" plus "streets." In this way the film "signifies upon Hollywood stereotypes, African American filmmakers' responses to those stereotypes, and on audience's expectations of horror" (Fulmer 424).

All four stories in *Tales from the Hood* touch on issues which are repeatedly addressed in the ghetto action cycle: police brutality ("Rogue Cop Revelation"), domestic abuse ("Boys Do Get Bruised"), racist politicians and government officials and the enduring legacy of slavery ("KKK Comeuppance"), and black on black violence ("Hard Core Convert"). While the film is often predictable and poorly acted, its themes and stories were extremely timely. For example, the film's first story, in which a black political activist (Tom Wright) is beaten to death by corrupt cops, echoes the Rodney King trials and their violent aftermath. And "KKK Comeuppance", in which a racist politician and former Ku Klux Klan member, Duke Metger (Corbin Bernsen), is running for governor in an unnamed Southern state, is even more explicit in its ties to contemporary news events. Metger, a thinly veiled caricature of David Duke, the racist politician and former Klan member who ran for various government positions throughout the 1990s, has set up his campaign headquarters in an old plantation mansion that is rumored to be

haunted by the souls of murdered slaves. Like the character in the film, David Duke ran on a platform which sought to overturn desegregation, busing, miscegenation and affirmative action. The segment in which Duke's fictional counterpart is ripped apart in his plantation home by the vengeful spirits of murdered slaves was the studio's attempt to exploit the contemporary audience's disgust with Duke, particularly since the target audience for this film was primarily black teenagers. In these segments *Tales from the Hood* effectively reveals its origins in the social problem film; at these moments the film's narrative comes to a standstill in order to deliver its message to the audience.<sup>106</sup> While this film does not say anything new about the gangsta or ghetto milieu, it is able to address these issues again merely by attaching social problems and their attendant images to the generic structure of the horror film, a structure which, according to Fulmer, functions "as a bait and switch of old-fashioned gore, thrills, violence and sex for a new-fashioned way for young people to perceive themselves and their world" (437). If the format of the ghetto action film can no longer support the weight of a social message, the filmmaker can sneak this message into a new context (or contexts), where it is unexpected, and therefore able to once again make an impact on the audience. In fact, *Tales from the Hood* performed much better at the box office than the later incarnations of the ghetto action cycle like *New Jersey Drive*, earning a total of \$11.8 million domestically. This increase in box office returns indicates that attaching the semantics and even the syntax of the ghetto action cycle to another genre's semantics and syntax can help extend its financial viability.

Most of the films I listed as examples of ghetto action hybrids, including *Gang of Roses* and *Hood of the Living Dead*, are also examples of D2D films, which, as I mentioned, are the primary format in which the themes and images of the original ghetto action cycle now

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<sup>106</sup> Director Rusty Cundieff has said of the film's message "I've always got to do something that has some kind of value to me. Because if you have a forum, you might as well use it" (qtd. in Fulmer 424)

appear.<sup>107</sup> These films repeat many of the semantic and syntactic elements of the original ghetto action cycle,<sup>108</sup> only without the financial resources of films with larger budgets and studio support. Over the past few years the D2D market in general has become extremely profitable, raking in an estimated \$3 billion each year (Lerman and Hettrick). These films can be made quickly, on miniscule budgets (films cost between \$75,000 and \$2 million to produce) (Littlejohn), and therefore can cater to a specific demographic. The niche audience of young black moviegoers are currently being courted by companies like Maverick entertainment, Simmons Lathan Media Group and Urban Entertainment. Likewise, many major studios are also targeting black audiences by creating smaller production units devoted to these so-called “urban” films. For example, MGM Home Entertainment recently signed a multi-million dollar deal with *VIBE* magazine “on the production and acquisition of urban movies to premiere exclusively on DVD” (Hettrick). The historically neglected black demographic (which is periodically recognized, but only when the industry finds itself in an economic slump), is consistently one of the largest segments of the total movie going audience. Thus, films by and for this audience “were among the first to prove this [D2D] market was more than a dumping ground, and they have subsequently paved the way for other genres traditionally shut out of cinemas” (Littlejohn). Like the B-films of the Eastside Kids and Little Tough Guys cycles, the D2D “urban” films are capable of exploiting contemporary trends and interests by attaching the same characters, images, settings and themes into more viable genres and film cycles. As a result of the success of

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<sup>107</sup> A few mainstream films released in the 2000s have taken up the themes and images of the ghetto action cycle, including like *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (2000, Jim Jarmusch), a samurai/art film/ghetto action hybrid, *Romeo Must Die* (2000, Andrzej Barzkowiak), a Hong Kong action/ghetto action hybrid, *State Property* (2002, Abdul Malik Abbott), a limited release ghetto action film, and *Paid in Full* (2002, Charles Stone III), a nostalgic gangster/ghetto action hybrid.

<sup>108</sup> Cynthia Fuchs argues that “hood movies,” or what I am calling ghetto action films, have become the new exploitative hook in low budget filmmaking “As a point of entry into filmmaking...the hood movie is looking a lot like the slasher flick of old. The scripts are formulaic, the filmmaking merely adequate, and the acting generally atrocious.”

and the ever-expanding market for D2D films, the ghetto action cycle, as well as its attendant semantic and syntactic elements, has found a new life, long after its originary films disappeared from the mainstream filmmaking radar. However, while the later B-film manifestations of the Dead End Kids cycle enacted the national project of converting juvenile delinquents into model citizens via the performance of popular clichés and the reiteration of contemporary sentiments—that is, to hide the racial and class differences of the boys—the D2D ghetto action cycle are unable to enact this same project since the very bankability of this cycle is founded on its depiction of a perceived difference and deviance. These films must continue to depict their characters as social Others in peril, and so in order to keep audience interest, they must attach these identical characters to new generic settings.

For example, *Hood of the Living Dead*, which tells the story of an aspiring scientist who conveniently develops an experimental “rejuvenation serum” to bring the dead back to life just days before his younger brother is killed in a gang-related drive-by shooting, clearly capitalizes on the successful zombie cycle of the 2000s,<sup>109</sup> but also ensures success with its target audience by rooting it in the familiar conventions of the ghetto action genre. For example, Ricky (Carl Washington) a research scientist charged with the care of his younger, gang banger brother, Jermaine (Brandon Daniels), sees that his brother is heading for trouble and consequently makes plans to move them out of the ghetto and in to the suburbs, a narrative convention lifted from the ghetto action cycle (*Menace II Society*, *Fresh*, *Boyz N the Hood*). And as in the ghetto action cycle, Jermaine is killed before this plan can be successfully enacted.

Interestingly, the film attaches the suspense tactics of the horror film to the real life horrors of the

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<sup>109</sup> *28 Days Later* (2002, Danny Boyle), *Dawn of the Dead* (2004, Zack Snyder), *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004, Alexander Witt), *Schaun of the Dead* (2004, Edgar Wright) and *Land of the Dead* (2005, George Romero), among others.

ghetto action film. For example, at the pivotal moment when Jermaine is killed in a drive-by shooting by a rival gang the soundtrack plays, not gangsta rap, or even the plangent score of the melodrama, but the swelling crescendos of stringed instruments that normally accompanies a monstrous attack in the horror film. Here, the real life violence of the ghetto is treated like the supernatural killer of a horror film, that is, as an unstoppable, unreasonable force plaguing society. This mixing of generic elements becomes, not just a way to extend the box office viability of the ghetto action cycle, it also revives the clichés of the ghetto action cycle, providing them with a new context and new modes of signification. *Hood of the Living Dead* takes a trite convention of the ghetto action cycle—the drive by—and adds a new resonance to it by making this event the catalyst for a zombie infestation when Ricky tries to bring Jermaine back to life.

I am not arguing here that this film is especially clever or inventive, only that its producers have found ways to get their viewers to reengage with a tired cinematic formula and thus to reconsider its original themes. For example, one viewer noted *Hood of the Living Dead*'s unusual mixing of generic elements in a user review on imdb.com:

I think it's more economical to eat your enemies than take vengeance in a drive-by, but then again, I'm a poor judge of the complexities of urban life. (How poor a judge? In response to a gory scene involving four men, I opined "Ah-ha! White t-shirts on everyone so the blood shows up. Economical! I used the same technique in my own low-budget horror film." Jordan replied, "No, that's gang dress. White t-shirts were banned from New Orleans bars for a time as a result." Oh.) (johnhenrich)

I cite this contemporary viewer response (posted one year after the film's initial release), because it illuminates how creating a generic hybrid offers a wide range of viewing possibilities, thus

expanding its potential audience beyond the so-called “urban” market and extending the life of the imagery found in the original ghetto action cycle. This particular viewer was clearly drawn to *Hood of the Living Dead* as a result of his interest in low budget filmmaking. He consequently read the actor’s costuming choices through the lens of the low budget horror film (i.e., fake blood looks more vivid against a white T-shirt), while his viewing companion read the white T-shirt as part of the ghetto action film’s “realism.” These different reading strategies illustrate how images are deployed for multiple syntactic purposes in ghetto action hybrids, thus allowing viewers to take different meanings away from the same semantic cue.

*Hood of the Living Dead* works almost entirely in shorthand, both in its production (with its bare sets, wooden acting, repetitive score) and its establishment of generic climates. The film takes up some of the most distilled imagery of the ghetto action film—drive-by gang shootings, the Oakland setting, the protagonists’ desire to get out of the ‘hood—but after so much repetition these now clichéd elements are almost entirely detached from the original syntax of social problem film. One disappointed fan explained “Here was a chance to mix the cheesy gore of the zombie movie with the realism of life in the ghetto, to have gangsta-thug zombies bombin’ on the innocent living while rockin’ do-rags, to have undead pimps drivin’ over all-too-mortal po-lice in their tricked-out rides.” (illadro). But having become clichés, the semantics of the ghetto action cycle can only serve as placeholders, as “hooks” to attract fans of “urban” products. Indeed, many posters on imdb.com mentioned that the primary impetus behind their decision to rent the film was its title, which promises viewers three possible viewing experiences—the ghetto action film, the zombie film and the low budget trash film—but only delivers the latter to a satisfying degree. As one imdb review explained: “If you want a good zombie movie, DON’T RENT THIS MOVIE. If you want a documentary-esquire look at “hood

life” you’re at the wrong place as well. If you’re looking for a laughable piece of film, this is a real winner!” (TheLotusRevolution).

*Leprechaun 5: Leprechaun in the Hood* is another interesting example of this emerging “urban” D2D cycle because it clearly capitalizes on the success of the D2D market, exploits the cultural cache of ghetto action films, gangsta rap, the success of the *Leprechaun* franchise and the tongue-in-cheek camp of the late 1990s *Scream* cycle. The film co-stars Ice-T, veteran of *New Jack City* and anti-establishment gangsta rap, who, through so many roles in low budget ghetto action films (see *Trespass* [1992, Walter Hill], *Surviving the Game* [1994, Ernest R. Dickerson], *The Wrecking Crew* [1999, Albert Pyun], *Gangland* [2000, Art Camacho], etc.) is now a permanent icon of the cycle. *Leprechaun 5* attempts to cover or reference as many genres and cycles as possible, while still making sure that the film remains identified as distinctively “urban.”<sup>110</sup> First, it opens with an extended reference to the blaxploitation cycle (also a source for the ghetto action film):<sup>111</sup> Mack Daddy (Ice T) and a companion head to an abandoned subway track where they search for a mysterious treasure. We know this scene is set in the 1970s because blaxploitation-style music is playing and the men don enormous afros, absurd platform shoes and polyester suits (despite the fact that these outfits are a wildly inappropriate for a day of breaking up concrete walls and digging through rubble in the subway). Eventually there is confrontation between Mack Daddy and the Leprechaun (Warwick Davis) over his treasure, and in a visual quote of *Foxy Brown* (1974, Jack Hill), Mack Daddy pulls increasingly larger weapons out of his afro, a gun, a baseball bat, etc. In addition to its horror narrative, *Leprechaun*

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<sup>110</sup> For example, although leprechauns are mythic figures hailing from Ireland, the film’s eponymous monster is (without any explanation) coded as being a gangsta or at least, as coming from a contemporary, criminalized, urban environment: he loves rap and engages in a rap battle, has a trio of “zombie fly girls,” loves to smoke marijuana, and, when initially freed from his inanimate state, says “Free at last, free at last, Thank God Almighty, free at last.”

<sup>111</sup> See Chapter 4 for a discussion of the blaxploitation cycle.

5 is also clearly a ghetto action film. Key semantic elements include: an emphasis on the deteriorating urban *mise en scène*, the frequent use of digressive camera movements which follow random urban residents in their day to day activities and which do little to forward the film's narrative, an antagonistic Korean store clerk, disapproving, church-going adults, buffoonish/exploitative white characters, and a plot formula about three boys attempting to "get out of Compton" by winning a national rap competition. Finally, the film's roots in the social problem film are found in its emphasis on the boys' desire to create "positive" rap music, despite the fact that Mack Daddy, the most successful figure in the neighborhood, built his music empire on gangsta rap.<sup>112</sup> The boys are faced with the difficult choice of making easy money by rapping about violence and misogyny, or staying poor but maintaining their ideals, a choice the Dead End Kids faces in many a film (only substitute crime for violent gangsta rap).

One major difference between this film and its ghetto action predecessors, however, is that the boys' main antagonist is not their poverty or the brutality of the streets, as it is in the ghetto action film (or even in the derivative *Tales from the Hood*). Instead, the blood thirsty Leprechaun, who terrorizes the 'hood in search of his magic flute, comes to represent the insidious forces of the hood environment that seduce the boys and keep them from pursuing their goal of making positive rap music. For example, when we see the boys perform their prosocial rap music, with lyrics like "The crew and me, we all got unity/ We keep the crowd hyped, positive-ly!" the scene is filmed primarily with long takes, slow pans and relatively little editing, reflecting the relaxed beat of the music and its more peaceful vibe. However, after the boys get

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<sup>112</sup> After hearing their demo tape Mack Daddy tells them "I ain't with that 'Save the Hood' bullshit...This label, we rap about Uzis, blowing motherfuckers' heads off, smack your bitch up, shoot your homeboy in the face type shit."

their hands on the Leprechaun's magic flute (an instrument which brings success and glory to its owner), their music changes its themes of "saving the 'hood" to violent songs about gunplay and gangstas. This performance sequence is filmed in aggressive and threatening, with frantic hand held cameras, rapid, MTV-style editing, close ups of the boys angry faces and plenty of low angle shots, a style mimicking the way action sequences in the ghetto action cycle are filmed. Although the boys originally reject Mack Daddy's offer to join his label because it would require them to abandon their dream of creating positive music, the flute hypnotizes them into valuing success and power over morals and social responsibility. And this decision, to take the easy, immoral way out of the hood, is what leads to each boys' ultimate demise, just as Doughboy's decision to perpetuate the cycle of violence in *Boyz N the Hood* is posited as the reason for his death at the end of the film. *Leprechaun 5* takes up the social problem film's syntax by offering harsh consequences (death) for poor choices. However, the boys' primary antagonist is not the socioeconomic conditions of the ghetto—it is a supernatural force. Therefore, it is difficult to discern if this message can still be detected by audiences, buried as it is within the conventions of the horror film.

What is most interesting about *Leprechaun 5* is that, despite its seeming throw-away status as a low budget farce, it has generated a surprising amount of viewer discussion on the imdb.com message boards. Over sixty-nine viewers took the time to post a review of the film and even more viewers engaged in discussions of the film on the site's message boards. As with *Hood of the Living Dead*, the primary impetus behind each viewer's decision to watch the film was their love of low budget films, the *Leprechaun* franchise and/or urban/ghetto action films: "Don't listen to the pundits who criticize the excesses and outright incongruities common to all straight-to-video camp...this movie shows how dangerous it can be when two totally different

worlds crash straight into each other” (nemtuskii). However, this type of generic mixing is also what seemed to ruin the film for fans who rented the film because of their devotion to the *Leprechaun* series “As a huge supporter of the *Leprechaun* series, and especially of *Leprechaun 4: In Space* (who cares how he got into space?), I was extremely excited to see Part 5. However, it seemed to be more of an afterschool [sic] special on gang warfare, the glories of church, and the ever-important ‘be true to yourself’ theme, with a leprechaun thrown in instead of a true vehicle of Leprechaunisms” (sptbgjen). Here the injection of the ghetto action films syntax was an unwelcome element. But such responses to the film, both positive and negative, explain why producers continue to churn out these films. By mixing together several different genres and cycles, each targeting a seemingly different demographic, producers can continue to exploit a familiar set of semantics and draw in more and more viewers.

### **2.3 CONCLUSIONS: RECUPERATING THEORIES OF GENERIC EVOLUTION**

The ultimate goal of this chapter was to sketch out what a model of cycle evolution might look like. First, film cycles form around the financial and/or critical success of one or two films which address a timely subject and have iconography or plot formulas which readily lend themselves to duplication. After a series of films which treat these images and narrative tropes in a straight forward manner, they begin to lose their ability to connect with the audience because the amount of repetition has dissolved the bond between signifier and signified, between image and meaning. In order to continue to generate revenue, studios select the most successful elements of the original cycle and attach them to one or more stables genres or cycles, usually beginning with the mode of comedy or parody. Though many critics have argued that the appearance of parody

or self reflexivity signals the creative end of an art form (Focillon, Cawelti, Schatz, etc.), an analysis of the ghetto action parody, *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* illustrates how a parody can *facilitate* a film cycle's creative "rebirth." Once audiences are able to laugh at a particular convention—like the convention of the drive by shooting—as a result of its overuse in previous films, producers are forced to rethink that convention; they must either eliminate it entirely or take it up in a new way (ergo, *Hood of the Living Dead*). This process explains why the ghetto action cycle continued to thrive long after the release of *Don't Be a Menace*; the parody forced producers to take up the semantics and syntax of the ghetto action cycle in new and creative ways. Dan Harries argues that "recent film parodies manage to be both hip and staid guardians of Hollywood's genre-based past" (291). In other words, a parody gives viewers what they want: the familiarity of a favorite genre paired with a knowing acknowledgement that these same viewers are too clever to be truly frightened, outraged or otherwise emotionally engaged by these familiar generic ploys. In this sense parodies act as a special contract made between the viewer and the text; it is a public demonstration that the viewer does not "really" like this type of film or is too intelligent for it and yet privately the viewer can enjoy the text nonetheless. I believe that this alluring push and pull between ridicule and enjoyment explains why campy generic hybrids like *Leprechaun 5: Leprechaun in the Hood* and *Hood of the Living Dead* continue to be produced and distributed. Likewise, although the Dead End Kids cycle never endured a parody, its conversion to the comic frame, particularly in its final manifestation, Allied Artists' slapstick, Abbott-and-Costello-esque "Bowery Boys" (1946-1958) cycle, offers viewers a similar contract: enjoyment of established characters placed into a mode that does not take itself too seriously.

But again, just because a cycle enters a comic stage or endures a parody does not mean it can only express itself in that comedic or parodic format. Once a cycle's images and tropes have been parodied or have appeared in the comic mode, both of which effectively sever the cycle's semantics from its original syntax, they are available for use in generic modes which are more likely to generate an audience, such as the periodically bankable Western, horror or science fiction genres. Studios may also capitalize on a timely sentiment or current event in order to further extend the financial viability of the original cycle. As long as the familiar icons, formulas, conventions and themes of these cycles are deployed in a new way or in a new generic setting, they are capable of resonating with audiences. Thus, while the previous chapter rejected the concept of generic evolution at the macro level of genres, this chapter recuperates the concept of evolution at the micro level of the film cycle. Only this model excludes the concept of a cycle's death; the images of the Dead End Kids and ghetto action cycles continue to circulate in texts to this day, albeit in a highly distilled form (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of the contemporary home of the ghetto action film's semantics and syntax).

Reading the ghetto action cycle through the paradigm of the Dead End Kids cycle reveals how film cycles can form around the exploitation of the public's interest in a particular social problem, in this case, the plight of urban youth. The fact that these cinematic social problems crop up in the 1930s and then again in the 1990s testifies both to the fact that our nation is cyclically concerned about the state of "today's youth" and our cities, but also that social problems have historically made for fascinating and profitable films. The originary film in each cycle, *Dead End* and *Boyz N the Hood*, were both made with the intent of educating the audience and possibly even motivating some kind of prosocial action. However, over time, these films came to be viewed as clichéd and ceased to connect with audiences. After all, if the goal of

a social problem film is create empathy with its victims so that the viewers will experience a sense of outrage over their mistreatment, then a social problem film populated with cartoonish or unbelievable characters and situations will ultimately fail.

Studying these two cycles side by side reveals how the suffering urban youth of the social problem film can be put to other, more lucrative purposes, once they have ceased performing their original function. The Eastside Kids cycle offered up the same images of urban youth getting into trouble found in the original Dead End Kids cycle, but discovered a more timely and therefore more plausible solution to this problem—transforming them into patriots. Thus the Eastside Kids cycle effectively tapped into the national project of rallying the population behind the war effort by transforming the unrecuperable social problem of the late 1930s—the juvenile delinquent—into a useful social product for the 1940s—the patriot or the soldier. Likewise, the problems of class and racial difference represented by the Dead End Kids, which could no longer be remedied in the generic context of the social problem film, are effectively glossed over in the Eastside Kids cycle in an effort to present a united American front at a time when consensus was a necessity. The clichéd semantics of the ghetto action cycle, by contrast, continue to thrive in the D2D market precisely because they continue to be associated with deviance and difference. There is no attempt to make these characters appear to blend in with the mainstream, since their (racial, economic and social) difference is why these film continue to sell: black audiences want to see film which attempt to depict aspects of the black experience while non-black audiences are viewing these films because of their fascination with the black experience. This perception of difference, now labeled as “urban” within the D2D market, is marketable because, whether audience members view these images as reflective of themselves or the Other, the very presence of these stereotypes provides the viewer with a sense

of control (Gilman 20). This process of cycle evolution also reveals how the study of film cycles—an industrial strategy dating back to the origins of cinema—are a useful object of study both within and outside the discipline of film studies. They can serve as a cross section of one moment in time, including the contemporary political climate, prevalent social ideologies, and popular tastes of film studios and society at large. Cycles offer new ways of understanding how the popular imagination interprets moments of social and cultural change, and how the film industry seeks to capitalize upon these interpretations. In the next chapter I will take up this concept of deviant images of difference by tracing how subcultural signifiers of teenage menace and rebellion, such as the 1950s juvenile delinquent and the 1990s gangsta, were effectively exploited for profit by the very culture which once feared them.

**3.0 THE JUVENILE DELINQUENT TEENPIC: HOW DOES THE EXPLOITATION  
OF YOUTH SUBCULTURES HELP TO CREATE A FILM CYCLE (AND VICE  
VERSA)?**

Its easy to be good, its hard to be bad  
Stay out of trouble, and you'll be glad  
Take this tip from me, and you will see  
How happy you will be...

I know, because I'm not a juvenile delinquent

“I'm not a Juvenile Delinquent” (1956), Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers

Fuckin' with me 'cause I'm a teenager  
with a little bit of gold and a pager  
Searchin' my car, lookin' for the product  
Thinkin' every nigga is sellin' narcotics.

“Fuck tha Police” (1989), N.W.A.

### 3.1 A TALE OF TWO DELINQUENTS

The best way to begin a discussion of the relationship between 1950s juvenile delinquent-themed teenpics and the 1990s ghetto action cycle—a lens which will demonstrate how subcultural identities, behaviors and styles can be exploited to create film cycles and, in turn, how film cycles further shape, disseminate and also *defuse* subcultures—is to offer up two parallel moments from each cycle. Consider this scene from American International Pictures' *I was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957, Gene Fowler, Jr.), in which a moody, lower middle class, white teenager, Tony Rivers (Michael Landon), is forced to see a psychiatrist in order to treat his angry, often violent, outbursts of hormonal angst. After a brief conversation with Dr. Alfred Brandon (Whit Bissel), a psychiatrist who believes that “the only hope for the human race is to hurl it back to its primitive dawn” through the doctor’s own special brand of “regression therapy,” Tony agrees to be a guinea pig for his experimental procedure. The doctor promises Tony that regression therapy will restore him to his “true self,” which turns out to be a violent, sex-mad, werewolf who murders several of his own teenaged classmates. The film implies that one of mankind’s biggest problems (beyond the atomic bomb) is the juvenile delinquent who balks at authority, lashes out for no reason and speaks in an incomprehensible patois.

During Tony’s second visit to the psychiatrist, the audience is privy to the effects of the treatment. As the doctor “regresses” Tony, we see a string of alternating close ups between the doctor’s mouth, as he counts backwards, and Tony’s mouth, as he sweats profusely, grimaces and bites his lip. These shots culminate in a series of close ups of each man’s eyes. The doctor’s eyes are anxious, watching Tony’s every move with anticipation, while Tony’s eyes are clenched shut. Throughout the treatment the same pattern is followed: Tony is in pain while Dr. Brandon appears to be enjoying this torment. Here, the deviant teenager is a scientific curiosity to be

studied, experimented upon and tortured. As Dr. Brandon explains to his assistant, if the experimental treatment goes awry it does not matter, since Tony is “headed for the electric chair” anyway. Indeed, the film invites its viewers to examine Tony both as a threat to society *and* as a victim of it; the alternating close ups allow us to take Dr. Brandon’s sadistic/curious viewing position as well as Tony’s passive, suffering one. As a problematic juvenile delinquent Tony needs to be punished *and* helped.

The film concludes with Tony killing Dr. Brandon, the man who has been exploiting his teenage angst, with his bare hands, much as teenagers in the late 1950s began to strike back at filmmakers and magazine editors who milked the teen ethos for profit while simultaneously making them appear as out of control monsters who are worthy of the dark fates visited upon their screen surrogates. Since it so accurately depicts the experiences of 1950s teenagers, who also perceived themselves as being pigeon-holed (as delinquents), examined and subjugated by the adults around them it is no wonder that *I was a Teenage Werewolf* was such a hit among its target audience. The successful film even spawned a cycle of “teenagers as monsters” pictures, including *I was a Teenage Frankenstein* (1957, Herbert L. Strock), *Teenagers from Outer Space* (1959, Tom Graeff) and *Teenage Zombies* (1960, Jerry Warren), all of which located supernatural terror and social destruction in the deviant behaviors of teenagers. It seems that teenagers enjoyed the double address of these films, in which they are both the tragically misunderstood victims of a cruel adult world as well as the root of society’s problems.

Now consider this scene from Rusty Cundieff’s 1995 release, *Tales from the Hood*. In the film’s fourth and final story, a sadistic, African American gang banger, Jerome (Lamont Bentley), is arrested on murder charges and, in order to avoid death row, agrees to an alternative, *Clockwork Orange*-style behavioral modification program run by Dr. Cushing

(Rosalind Cash). As in *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*, Jerome's "treatment" involves converting the body of deviant youth into an object of scientific spectacle; we are offered a series of close ups of different parts of Jerome's glistening, semi-nude body as they are strapped to a Medieval-looking metal rack. We hear Jerome groan, cry out and jerk his body as attendants shove several inches of plastic tubing up his nose, attach metal clamps to his nipples, place a restraint on his penis and a ball gag in his mouth. The fetishistic, sexually charged nature of this scene is further enhanced by the fact that all of the attendants are attractive, scantily dressed women who smile every time Jerome strains or lets out a cry of pain. Once Jerome is strapped down, he and the audience (who are provided with Jerome's viewing position), are subjected to a series of rapidly edited images: black and white photographs of lynchings intercut with color film footage of contemporary gang violence (drive bys, execution-style shootings, etc.). All of these images are accompanied by the track "Born II Die" (1995) by Spice 1, a song which details the rapper's fetishization of firearms and the code of kill or be killed.<sup>113</sup> It is significant that while the moving, color footage in this montage has been staged for the movie, the black and white lynching images are actual photographs (or postcards)<sup>114</sup> of lynchings that took place on U.S. soil. By including these images—which lynching spectators could take home as souvenirs or mail to friends in other cities—*Tales from the Hood* is placing the contemporary nihilism of gang culture in the context of a long tradition of institutionally sanctioned, racially motivated murder.

However, the film quickly moves away from this insightful, though generalized, social critique in the following scene, which finds Jerome strapped to yet another chair in a

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<sup>113</sup> For example the chorus is "One to the chest and one to the dome/ Well if them niggaz catch you slippin' then yo' ass is gone (Born II Die)/ Aim yo' best for the head so yo' brains get blown/ Well if them niggaz catch you slippin' then yo' ass is gone."

<sup>114</sup> For many years photographs of lynchings were made into postcards; it was not until the mid-twenties that the postmaster general banned the mailing of these postcards (Lockard).

sensory-deprivation room. In this setting, Jerome is confronted by the specters of the people he has murdered, who question why *they* had to die. When Jerome attempts to blame society for his violent acts, Dr. Cushing scolds him, “Who is responsible? Your mother? Your father? Your teachers? The world?...You’ve got to take responsibility to break the chain!” Much as Dr. Brandon blamed Tony’s delinquent behavior for mankind’s devolution into chaos and mass destruction, Jerome is asked to take sole responsibility for the violence which the film earlier had linked to the legacy of America’s strained race relations. In this way Jerome is posited as both a victim of the country’s bloody racial history *and* as a cold-blooded murderer who is entirely responsible for his own actions. When Jerome refuses to repent at the end of the story, screaming “I don’t give a fuck” over and over, we see that this story has been a dream, a last chance at redemption before Jerome succumbs to fatal injuries sustained in a gang-related shooting.

These two, parallel moments highlight the strange, multivalent, symbiotic relationship between youth subcultures and film cycles. For while the mainstream profited from its “discovery” and consequent marketing of controversial youth subcultures and their attendant behaviors and styles in the 1950s and the 1990s, it could never quite settle on an appropriate way to address its target teenage market. As I mentioned, films like *I was a Teenage Werewolf* and *Tales from the Hood* contain a doubled address to their teenage viewers. On the one hand, they are populated with imagery intended to seduce teenagers with their contemporaneity (expressed through music, clothing style, slang, and behaviors) and screw-the-world nihilism. These films made money precisely because they made a visual spectacle of aspects of teenage subcultures that were recognized as controversial, dangerous and being on the margins of mainstream culture. At the same time, however, the subcultural imagery depicted in these films could not be so marginal that it appealed only to a small slice of the teenage demographic; dominant culture,

represented in this case by film studios, *must* de-fuse certain aspects of a subculture in order to ensure that its product—an image, for example, of a leather-jacketed juvenile delinquent—is marketable to a more general audience. As John Clarke explains, for teen audiences these stylistic choices represent a way of being, but for the studios these styles are understood solely as products: “from the standpoint of the subculture which generated it, the style exists as a *total lifestyle*; via the commercial nexus, it is transformed into a *novel consumption style*” (“Style” 188). These images had to be both novel and accessible, antisocial and commodifiable, threatening but not too threatening. Thus, in these two teen-targeted films, certain *selected*, reproducible elements of teen subcultural style are offered to the audience: Tony and Jerome speak in a contemporary idiolect, don teen fashions and enjoy teen music (rock n’ roll and gangsta rap, respectively). Since subcultural styles are a form of “confrontation dressing” (Hebdige 107), existing precisely to provoke a reaction in those who see it, they are readymade for the cinema screen. It is simple to depict teenage rebellion on film when rebellion can be signified visually, by the gang banger’s red bandana or the juvenile delinquent’s ducktail, or aurally, through a rock n’ roll or gangsta rap soundtrack.

Furthermore, while these two film cycles were looking to capitalize upon youth subcultural trends and to appeal to the teenager’s world view, they could not be seen as advocating the explicitly antisocial behaviors of the subculture from which these styles stem; thus, both boys are also located as the source of contemporary social ills and must be punished accordingly. This “moral” impulse explains why so many of the films in both cycles open with a “square up,” or a prefatory statement about the social or moral ill the film is depicting (Schaefer *Bold!* 69). The typical square up usually explains that the story the audience is about to see is happening “right now,” and that while addressing such topics might be unpleasant, it is necessary

if society is ever going to eliminate this significant social problem. The square up, a hallmark of the exploitation film, points to the fine line that these films walked between education and titillation (Schaefer *Bold!* 70). The square up safeguarded studios from further criticism from censors by allowing them to preemptively criticize the salacious material they were selling (by cloaking it in the guise of civic duty).

Although the ghetto action cycle has almost never been understood within the context of the JD teenpic<sup>115</sup> (perhaps because JD teenpics deal primarily with the deviance of white teenagers while the ghetto action cycle addresses the deviance of black teenagers), they share a common set of semantics as well as a similar syntax. Both cycles focus on the lives of contemporary teenagers and their deviant behaviors, including listening and dancing to rock n' roll or rap music, racing hot rods or stealing cars, engaging in "confrontation" dressing and taking or distributing illegal drugs. Both cycles exploit contemporary, sensational, topics that snowballed into widespread "moral panics,"<sup>116</sup> such as the newly emerging concepts of the teenager, juvenile delinquency, and rock n' roll in the mid-1950s, and concerns over teenage gangs, inner city crime, the war on drugs, and the escalating popularity of gangsta rap in the early 1990s. In addition to these shared semantic elements, both film cycles also contain a similar, dual syntax: the establishment/celebration of deviance followed by the containment of this deviance. Most teenpics open with scenes in which members of mainstream society—usually the adult, middle class, white, Protestant segment of society—are frightened, outraged or

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115 This similarity was first brought to my attention by Dr. Jane Feuer. I have only encountered one text—Timothy Shary's *Generation Multiplex* (2002)—which discusses ghetto action films as a cycle within the broader category of the teen film. However, Shary's book does not discuss the images and themes which the ghetto action film adopts from the teenpic.

116 In *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1980) Stanley Cohen loosely defines a moral panic as "the mobilization of public opinion, the orchestration by the media and public figures of an otherwise inchoate sense of unease" (xxiv) over a perceived threat to societal values. Though moral panics are always triggered by actual events, they are *amplified* by the association of these events with larger, abstract problems in society.

at least concerned by a subcultural style or behavior. The very fact that these behaviors are shunned by squares, whites or the mainstream adult community is precisely what marks them as contemporary and enticing to the target teenage market. However, after allowing the viewer the vicariously indulge in this rebellion, teenpics almost always conclude with a containment of the offending subcultural behavior or style; the majority of films in both cycles end with images of teenagers reforming, being incarcerated, killed or otherwise exiled from society. On occasion, these films conclude that the offending behavior has been “misread” by the mainstream, that it is prosocial rather than antisocial, leading to a joyous celebration of teen subcultures in the final reel.

One, final significant similarity between the two cycles is their synergistic relationship with contemporary music. 1950s teenpics capitalized on the success of a new, controversial musical genre, rock n’ roll, thus helping to solidify the generalized, media-amplified alarm over rock n’ roll and youth rebellion. Film studios used the popularity of rock n’ roll to help sell their teenpics, which often included musical performances with little or no relation to the central narrative of the film (see Jerry Lee Lewis’ unmotivated musical performance in the opening to *High School Confidential!* [1958, Jack Arnold]). Marketers of ghetto action films also relied on the use of a then-controversial musical genre, gangsta rap, to promote their films. Most of the magazine ad space for major ghetto action films, like *Boyz N the Hood* (1991, John Singleton), *Juice* (1992, Ernest R. Dickerson), *South Central* (1992, Steve Anderson) and *Posse* (1993, Mario Van Peebles),<sup>117</sup> are devoted to a list of the artists and singles to be included on the soundtrack, as opposed to information about each film’s storyline. These tracks, by popular, contemporary artists, are often written expressly for the films. Several ghetto

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<sup>117</sup> Note to reader: I have photocopies of these ads but have misplaced details about their source (month, page number, etc.). I plan to locate this information when I do more archival research in *The Source*.

action films (*Boyz N the Hood*, *Juice*, *Friday* [1995, F. Gary Gray], etc.) even have rappers performing in lead roles, much as rock n' roll teenpics like *Rock Around the Clock* (1956, Fred F. Sears) and *Go, Johnny, Go!* (1959, Paul Landres) used contemporary rock n' roll artists to play characters not too different from their stage personas. The inclusion of contemporary music in both teen film cycles serves a double function: to sell the music to the target audience and to make a spectacle of the film's contemporaneity and its privileged knowledge and production of teenage desires.<sup>118</sup>

In addition to determining what the lens of the 1950s JD teenpic reveals about the ghetto action cycle and what it conceals, this chapter will analyze how the deviant imagery of these two subcultures was successfully exploited by mainstream culture, and how the depiction of these subcultures within two successful film cycles worked to expand and even contour the parameters of each subculture. Despite the fact that the film studios behind the 1950s JD teenpic and the 1990s ghetto action cycle ultimately defused much of the potentially political, class-based protests<sup>119</sup> of each respective subculture, they also widened the “‘cultural space’ which permits the selective re-working and re-appropriation of the style by geographically-dispersed groups” (Clarke “Style” 186). So while elements of each subculture were selectively reproduced and potentially bastardized by their successful exploitation in film cycles, these film cycles were also integral to the proliferation, diffusion and even the active shaping of how subcultures and

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118 The studio issued press kit for *Boyz N the Hood* includes a separate packet devoted entirely to the film's soundtrack which equates the film's music with “the real” and “the now”: “The film says, simply, ‘Take a look around.’ The soundtrack says, ‘See what you hear.’” The press kit also explains that the tracks included are what today's teens are listening to “What you're hearing on the album could very well be the music the characters in the film would be listening to.”

119 John Clarke argues that the demands of the commercial market, which require the exploitation of only those elements most amenable to mass promotion, result in the erasure of the class element at the root of so many subcultures: “The production for a specifically youthful market was posited on the image of a society moving towards ‘classlessness’; this definition was specifically embodied in the idea of a ‘generation gap’ and the increasing affluence of the young” (“Style” 188).

their teenage participants understood themselves. Film studios should therefore not be read as faceless corporate monsters that made teenagers appear as out of control deviants and then took their money to boot; rather, the relationship between studios and subcultures is one of *mutual benefit*. While most contemporary subcultural studies discuss the integral role that media play in the formation and dissemination of subcultural style, few have addressed the symbiotic relationship between film cycles and subcultures in any detail. By comparing two film cycles created out of a desire to exploit the existence of two controversial youth subcultures, I hope to uncover the complex process by which film studios convert subcultural signifiers into film language and how that film language, in turn, helps to further shape subcultures. I see this process, not as a linear, back-and-forth exchange, but as a fluid process, making it difficult to determine the line between subcultural “creation” and mainstream “exploitation.” Ultimately, this chapter aims to establish the significant role played by the process of cycle formation in reflecting and defining the contemporary social, cultural and political moment for a particular audience. Cycles naturally form around and as a part of, the *zeitgeist*, and so an examination of films, as part of a cycle, is integral to any study of American popular cultural history.

### **3.1.1 Defining Subcultures**

In their introduction to *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain* (1975), Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and others describe subcultures as “smaller, more localized and differentiated structures, within one or other of the larger cultural networks” (13). Subcultures are defined by a set of social rituals which “underpin their collective identity and define them as a group rather than as a collection of individuals” (45). Unlike groups that take a separatist stance towards mainstream culture, like the Amish, subcultures are not autonomous;

they always exist in relation to and are dependent upon the dominant culture (Doherty 47). In his seminal study of British working class youth, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Dick Hebdige argues that subcultures are commonly created as a resistance to the dominant hegemony and represent a “‘solution’ to a specific set of circumstances, to particular problems and contradictions” (81) within the current hegemony. These solutions manifest themselves in an “identity” marked by clothing style, music preferences, behavioral patterns, choices in language and peer groups. In this way, each subculture represents “a different handling of the ‘raw material of social existence’” (Hebdige 80). For example, the 1950s teenage subculture was broadly associated with various interlinked activities such as listening to or creating rock n’ roll music, building and racing hot rods and being part of a gang (or affecting the posture of a gang member). Thus when I refer to the 1950s teen subcultural style I am signaling all of these activities as well as fashion (including ducktails, blue jeans and leather jackets for boys and toreador pants and tight sweaters for girls), music (rock n’ roll) and a specialized slang (dig, crazy, the most, cats, etc.). In the early 1990s the African American-based teenage subculture (which quickly spread to middle class white teenagers) was associated with various interlinked activities as well like listening to or creating rap music, graffiti art, hip hop dancing, driving “tricked out” cars with elaborate stereo systems, and being part of a gang (or affecting the posture of a gang member). So when I refer to the hip hop subculture I am referring to these activities, as well as to certain fashions (baggy pants, baseball caps, expensive sneakers, gold jewelry, designer clothing by Cross Colors and Karl Kani), music and a specialized slang (dope, fresh, phat, nigga, etc.).

Subcultures, then, are prominent countercurrents in the otherwise smooth flow of dominant discourse from its source on high to the rest of society below. However, these

countercurrents are nevertheless “magical solutions” to lived contradictions because “While the contradictions are the result of real social conditions, positions, and subordinations, the style/identity can only respond at the level of culture/ideology/identity, and thus, the contradictions remain firmly in place” (Grossberg 29). Although subcultures initially pose a “symbolic challenge to a symbolic order,” these subcultures are inevitably, almost instantaneously, recuperated into the very system they are supposedly challenging. According to Hebdige, this process of recuperation, in which “the fractured order is repaired and the subculture incorporated as a diverting spectacle within the dominant mythology from which it in part emanates,” takes two forms: the conversion of “subcultural signs” into mass-produced objects and the “labeling” or redefinition of this style by dominant groups (94). These twin processes are important to keep in mind since our understanding of subcultures is, more often than not, shaped almost entirely through their re-presentation in print media, films, television and clothing trends. We rarely witness subcultures in their initial, raw form; instead, what the mainstream sees of a particular subculture is, more than often than not, what has already been translated into a commercially viable product. As I will demonstrate, this process of “spectacular consumption” or “the process by which the material and symbolic relations among the culture industry, the life worlds of persons, and the ontological status of cultural forms are transformed in terms generated by public consumption” (Watts and Orbe 228), is a defining feature of subcultural style.

Though images of subcultures, as cultures which initially appeal to marginal tastes, must be transformed in order to appeal to the mainstream and thus generate a profit, they must retain some element of their (perceived) threat to the status quo in order to appeal to their target market. In other words, audiences enjoy consuming images of delinquent teenagers, not

for their sameness, but for their difference and for their ability to generate anxiety (Watts and Orbe “The Spectacular Consumption” 230). Furthermore, members of a subculture seldom have a choice about which elements of their unique style will be promoted to the mainstream culture; rather “the news media select those aspects of the style which are to be made public, according to the dominant culture’s perception of its significance” (Clarke “Style” 186). In the case of the 1990s gangsta style, the media latched onto the misogynistic, violent and homophobic aspects of gangsta rap—as opposed to its moments of social critique—since the former created a more sensational news story. As a result, the general impression of gangsta rap was that it was socially destructive and dangerous. In this way, the media plays an integral role in shaping the future of subcultures by redefining them for mainstream consumption. Furthermore, as Karen Brooks argues “One of the ironies extant in the youth market and its associated products is that while young people may think they are resisting the dominant culture by adopting a particular mien or lifestyle, they are, in effect, sustaining the commercial viability of the commodification of teen spirit” (5). By the time the majority of teenagers were able to label their choice to wear blue jeans as indicative of the “juvenile delinquent,” this style was already a mass-produced trend emanating from films, newspapers and magazine pictorials.

What is most fascinating about both film cycles is that while their primary appeal was the depiction of was cutting edge and antiestablishment for the contemporary teenage market—both subcultures were hailed as the end of the traditional moral values, as signs of the loss of “America” itself (Gray 16) –these films were also the products of the very establishment that their target market was supposedly “rebellious” against. Early models of subcultural theory (most famously those articulated by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham in the 1970s) often posited what Oliver Marchant has identified as the

“incorporation myth” (85), which assumes that subcultures are intrinsically subversive or resistant to mainstream culture and that there is a definitive line between a subculture and the parent culture (i.e., the mainstream). However, more recent subcultural theorists argue that, in today’s media-saturated landscape, there is no privileged moment when a subculture is free of cooptation, when we might experience it “in the raw” (Weinzierl and Muggleton 8). Rather, the concepts of mainstream behaviors and subcultural behaviors are born at the same moment, since these forces simultaneously construct one another, relying on each other for their existence. In fact, “the creation of the subcultural Other, such as the media, the mainstream or the popular, elides the role each plays in the subculture’s own internal construction” (Stahl 29). The mainstream exists as a social pastiche where fragments from the margins are incorporated and fragments of the mainstream are likewise “excorporated” back into the margins (Stahl 31); there is no clear dividing line between parent culture and subculture. Rather, “The media exist as systems of communication critical to the circulation of ideas, images, sounds and ideologies that bind culture(s) together” (Stahl 31). As a result, the mainstream cannot be seen as “monolithically Other” since, even at the moment of its origin, a subculture is always dependent upon the mainstream for its existence (and vice versa).

If subcultures represent a creative “solution” to specific problems located in the status quo, then when teenagers in the 1950s began listening to rock n’ roll or racing their souped up hot rods down back country roads, such activities can be read as an outlet for teens to assert their newfound postwar independence as well as a desire for the danger denied them in the safe confines of their affluent, post-war suburbs (Doherty 108). These subcultural activities were contesting an ideology which claimed, among other things, that teenagers must be asexual, docile

and racially segregated.<sup>120</sup> The subcultural activities of 1990s teenagers, specifically listening to rap and taking on the persona of the gangsta, emerge from a very different set of socioeconomic circumstances, namely the economic devastation of certain neighborhoods of post-industrial Los Angeles, like Watts, Compton, Northwest Pasadena, Carson and North Long Beach. This process of ghettoization in Los Angeles, which began in the late 1960s as a result of a rise in the urban population coupled with economic displacement and factory closures (Kelley *Race Rebels* 192), is one of the primary forces behind the production of the gangsta ethos.

Given their association with violence, mobility and independence, it is not surprising that these two subcultures were labeled as “deviant” by contemporary public discourses. Daniel Dotter explains that “[ruling] social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders” (89). Thus, moral policing groups such as Estes Kefauver’s Senate Judiciary Subcommittee to investigate juvenile delinquency in the 1950s and Tipper Gore’s Parents’ Music Resource Center (or PMRC) in the 1980s and 1990s made social problems out of juvenile deviance and gangsta rap, respectively, merely by stating that they *were* social problems. The criminal patina of these subcultural behaviors was further heightened through intense media scrutiny, resulting in what Stanley Cohen has labeled “deviation amplification,” or the process by which increased attempts—by the public, politicians and most especially, the media—to understand a deviant act, results in an increased awareness of said deviance (though not an actual increase in deviance) and the subsequent creation of a moral panic. But as I

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<sup>120</sup> Here I should mention that Cohen cautions about putting too much value on the academic interpretation of subcultural symbols: “It is hard to say which is the more sociologically incredible: a theory which postulates cultural dummies who give homologous meanings to all artefacts [sic] surrounding them or a theory which suggests that individual meanings do not matter at all.” He suggests that the scholar of youth culture take his/her cues from anthropologists who compile three levels of data: the observable external form, the “indigenous exegetics” offered by ritual specialists or laymen, and the social scientists’ interpretation (xv). When possible, I attempt to use all three levels of data in this chapter.

mentioned, it is precisely this increased scrutiny that helped to define and further diffuse each subculture. Had they never been controversial, these subcultures and their styles and behaviors never would have reached a broader, mainstream audience.

### **3.2 FROM THE MARGINS TO THE CENTER: SHAPING THE 1950S TEEN SUBCULTURE**

In order to understand the similarities between the 1950s JD teenpic and the 1990s ghetto action cycle, it is necessary to further establish how and when the subcultures they purport to represent became the epicenter of national social problems. If movies are an accurate reflection (or refraction) of contemporary belief systems, then throughout the 1930s, when social problem films, such as the Dead End Kids cycle, were being produced, juvenile delinquency was perceived to be a problem rooted in definable causes (poverty, lack of good parenting, etc.). The troubled youths appearing in the Dead End Kids cycle are therefore depicted as the empathetic victims of their destitute environments who, with the right intervention, can be successfully reformed. Likewise, early exploitation films such as *Are These Our Children?* (1931, Wesley Ruggles), *Reefer Madness* (1938, Louis Gasnier), *Where are Your Children?* (1943, William Nigh) and *I Accuse My Parents* (1944, Sam Newfield) also portray troubled or delinquency-prone teenagers primarily as the innocent victims of manipulative adult forces (Betrock 9).

This sympathetic view of adolescents begins to change in the 1940s with the postwar baby boom, when youth became a symbol of the fear and expectations the American public had about the impact of World War II on the nation's future. Several actions—like the creation in 1942 of the Commission on Children in Wartime, the 1943 “March of Time”

newsreel series, *Youth in Crisis*,<sup>121</sup> the 1943 “Zoot Suit riots” in Los Angeles, and the 1946 national conference devoted to the prevention and control of juvenile delinquency (Gilbert 24-40)—contributed to a generalized sense of alarm and concern over “the state of American youth.” J. Edgar Hoover, then head of the FBI, even went so far as to compare the wartime crime wave with the exploits of another media-generated social threat which the FBI had “conquered” in the 1930s, John Dillinger (Doherty 120). Therefore, most Americans in the 1950s were made aware of juvenile delinquency through mediated sources, including politicians, moral pundits, the media, and of course the creation of film cycles, rather than through direct personal experience (Gilbert 27). Stanley Cohen adds that such moral panics are usually exacerbated by the media’s emphasis on the novelty of a “social problem,” making it appear more threatening “than something which has been coped with in the past” (68). Indeed, teen delinquency was often described as new and unprecedented in American society.

The way in which a particular media source defines a problematic subculture is also dependent upon who their target audience is: “Once primary definitions are ‘in play’, the media can *transform* these by translating them into their own public language. This language is based on the particular paper’s assumption about its audience and *their* language” (Hall, et al 75). So while newspapers, aimed primarily at adults seeking out news, might discuss 1950s teenagers derogatorily as “wild” or out of control,<sup>122</sup> JD teenpics, aimed at teenagers seeking out images of themselves, would likewise sensationalize the same teen behaviors, but in a more sympathetic or celebratory fashion. This dual address of fear and seduction is characteristic of

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<sup>121</sup> This brief, Oscar-nominated documentary argues that postwar culture, created by absent fathers, working mothers, and disposable teen incomes, has created a subversive teenage culture. However, it posits several solutions including urging teenagers to become involved in prosocial activities, such as the selling of war bonds and the formation of 4-H clubs.

<sup>122</sup> James Gilbert’s *A Cycle of Outrage: America’s Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* offers a detailed history of official reactions to teenagers and delinquency at this time.

the way mainstream sources (newspapers, magazines, films) present subcultures to their target markets.

Of course, it was not just World War II and the mass media that changed America's perception of the juvenile—the adolescent's own perception of him/herself was also changing at this time. In the 1940s, while government and social agencies were wringing their hands over juvenile crime, adolescents were gaining increasing autonomy by taking on part-time jobs. This source of income gave teenagers a newfound freedom, both financial and social, from adult society. The money they made, which was not necessary for the maintenance of their (primarily middle class) households went towards the purchase of cars (so sorely needed in the isolated suburbs where many middle class household were now located) as well as less expensive "leisure" products like clothing, magazines, records and movie tickets.<sup>123</sup> At the same time, savvy marketers became highly aware of this new independent consumer and social group, an awareness both marked and generated by the release of several book-length studies of youth, including: A.B. Hollingshead's *Elmstown's Youth* (1949), Dorothy W. Baruch's *How to Live with Your Teenager* (1953) and Paul Landis' *Understanding Teenagers* (1955), among others. (Doherty 67). One of the first and most influential contributions to the study of the emerging teenager, Robert and Helen Lynd's 1929 study *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*, began as a sociological analysis of the "typical American city," the town of Muncie, Indiana. But during the course of their study the authors discovered what they saw as a new phenomenon—that the high school aged residents of "Middletown" had formed their own society, their own "social cosmos" separate from the adult world (211), complete with

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<sup>123</sup> A 1956 poll conducted by the Gilbert Youth Research Organization found that the average allowance/earnings for a teenage boy was \$8.96 (up from \$2.41 approximately twelve years before). The poll found that "In some cases, the youngsters have more uncommitted pocket money than their parents" ("Bobby-Soxers' Gallup").

hierarchies and rituals. This sense of society can be partially attributed to the fact that as America transitioned from an agrarian to an industrial economy, more and more adolescents had the luxury of completing their high school educations: “Today the school is becoming not a place to which children go from their homes for a few hours daily but a place from which they go home to eat and sleep” (Lynd 211). This transition allowed adolescents to see themselves as a distinct social group apart from their traditional familial sphere.

During and after World War II, popular magazines also began to feature articles on this nascent social group, which had a profound impact on the shaping of the teenager’s self awareness. In fact, the first use of the term “teenager” has been traced to a 1945 article which appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* by Elliot E. Cohen entitled “A Teen-Age Bill of Rights” (Doherty 67). By December of 1948 *Life* magazine had devoted its cover and feature story to the “teenager” and his/her leisure activities. The articles, which covered topics like music, clothing, haircuts, kissing, sock hops and general teenage “do’s and don’ts” describe American adolescents like a newly discovered tribe whose behaviors are exotic and incomprehensible to adult society (“Teen-Agers” 67-75).<sup>124</sup> One section is a series of photographs depicting various teenage rituals, step-by-step, such as the “temptation game” or the “politician’s handshake” (“Teen-Agers” 68). And so a decisive element in the formation of the modern teenager was not just financial independence and baby boom numbers, but also “an acute sense of themselves as a special, like-minded community bound together by age and rank,” an awareness that was “carefully nurtured and vigorously reinforced by the adult institutions around them” (Doherty 46). While youth as a social group clearly existed in the popular cultural

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<sup>124</sup> For example, one section begins in this way “A stocking or a greeting is a simple thing that adults deal with every day. But to teen-agers simplicity is a challenge; they have to find a way to make it complicated and turn it into a game. On meeting instead of just shaking hands, they go through the violent contortions of a ‘beer drinker’s’ or a ‘politician’s’ handshake (*see opposite page*)...” (68).

imagination prior to the 1950s, the category of the teenager was not solidified as a lucrative *market reality* until this time.

Throughout the early to mid-1950s, entire magazines began to appear which catered exclusively to this newly discovered teenage market, including titles like *Dig!*, *Teen*, *Teen World*, *Teen Life*, *Flip*, *Youth*, and *Miss* (Gilbert 23). Though youth-oriented magazines had existed prior to the 1950s, these publications were different in that they recognized the teenager as a special subculture and spoke to him/her as a “friend” (Doherty 59), while also clearly exploiting this newly formed subculture for profit. The editor’s letter for the first issue of *Teen* from July 1957, for example, claims to be “the first” magazine to delve into all aspects of teen life: “*TEEN* magazine, born into a generation that has finally come to recognize persons between the ages of 13 and 19 as a distinct cultural group, now opens its pages to the future” (1). The April 1957 edition of *Teen Life* magazine<sup>125</sup> even exploits this very exploitation; the editor’s letter alerts its teen readers to the fact that the publishing world is currently taking advantage of their interests, such as the recent death of James Dean (which had greatly affected a large segment of the teenage population), in order to make a profit: “Myths and men have been vulgarly exploited and the temples of publishing have been deluged with money-changers” (5). But the editor then assures the reader that “This magazine, as are all magazines of this corporation, is dedicated to you. We never violate your ideals or your confidence” (5). In the 1950s teenagers were informed, on a mass scale, that they were separate, special and different from the mainstream adult society—by that very same adult society. Each magazine claimed to be the publication that *truly* understood and recognized the significance of “today’s teen.” For example, a 1958 issue of *TEEN* magazine explains “Teenagers today have double the

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<sup>125</sup> *Teen Life* also explains in its first issue that the editorial staff is composed of “young people” and that some are even “teens like yourself” (5).

responsibility , and double the self-reliance of yesterday's teener. The 1958 'teen is a first-class citizen of the world who has tackled and conquered problems that he would never have faced if he had been this age only a few years ago" (7).<sup>126</sup>

Given the heightened awareness of teenagers as a social group and burgeoning fears about their independence throughout the 1940s, it is not surprising that by the mid-1950s, the concepts of teenagers and juvenile delinquents would become almost interchangeable in public discourses. As one annoyed teenager explained in a 1960 letter to the editor of *Ingénue* magazine "Teen-agers used to be known as 'the younger generation' and conversation usually began with 'What is this younger generation coming to?' Now it's teenagers and its synonym, juvenile delinquency. (According to our elders in the spotlight, anyway). Just new words for the same old problem" (Bromley 9). Contemporary fears over the teenager were rooted primarily in the fact that they were a subculture that produced and defined their own social discourses which were both resistant and often incomprehensible to adult society. This labeling of defiant behaviors is, according to Tim Lucas, necessary to the maintenance of a coherent social order because "when moral boundaries are transgressed and an established order disturbed, by labeling the deviant factor as filth, boundaries between the socially acceptable and intolerable are reestablished" (149).<sup>127</sup>

*The Wild One* (1953, Laszlo Benedek) was one of the first films to acknowledge the fundamental split (in politics, consumption and lifestyle) between the youth subculture and the mainstream, adult society of the 1950s. This film also helped to establish the image of the

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<sup>126</sup> One teenager wrote in to *Teen Magazine* to thank them for creating a publication that "we can understand and moreover, that understands us!...Your magazine has picked up on our line of thought and put it down on paper. Music, movies, clothes, and sports—just the way we like it..." (Harrison 7).

<sup>127</sup> For example, in 1956, New York City Youth Board official Ralph W. Whelan, issued a statement that "too much publicity was being given to teen-age crime": "Because of 'three isolated incidents of crime among youth,' Mr. Whelan said, 'the press picked it up and the first thing we knew we had an almost hysterical situation on our hands' ("Youth Crime Rise is Held Magnified" 1).

cinematic JD, including the leather jacket, specialized language and souped up motorcycle/car. The film opens with a square up that justifies the film's content by indicating that it is based on a true story<sup>128</sup> of a marauding motorcycle gang that terrorized a small town. Whereas the delinquents of the 1930s and 1940s were almost always rooted in a defined social context, leading to the convention of opening a film with lengthy shots of the *mise en scène* in order to establish the poverty-stricken milieu against which juvenile delinquents must struggle, *The Wild One* opens with a low angle shot of a generic, paved road, dappled with shadows. We then hear the voice of the protagonist, Johnny (Marlon Brando), who informs the audience that "It begins here, for me, on this road. How the whole mess happened, I don't know..." Soon, the musical soundtrack becomes more urgent and in the background of the shot we see figures approaching, quickly, paired with the sounds of revving motorcycle engines. The motorcyclists zoom past and seem to ride over the camera, as if they were going to drive right out of the movie screen and into the audience. This opening sequence implies that the delinquents in *The Wild One* have no social origin; rather, they emerge, fully formed, out of thin air (or the newspaper headlines). This image of the road then cuts to a medium close up of the motorcycle gang, led by Brando, riding their bikes against a rear-projected landscape. The use of rear projection here bolsters the feeling of placelessness, and the idea that these rebels have emerged from nowhere and everywhere.

With their taste for bebop music and slang, their identical leather jackets and blue jeans, and their unifying distrust of authority, we can assume that the Black Rebels are, at least in style and mentality, part of the contemporary youth culture (even though their ages are never specified within the narrative). In fact, the image of Johnny straddling his motorcycle has

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<sup>128</sup> The film is based on an incident which occurred in 1947 in the town of Hollister, California, which was turned into the short story by Frank Rooney entitled "Cyclists' Raid," which appeared in a 1951 *Harper's* magazine (McGee and Robertson 20).

become an icon of angsty, directionless 1950s teen rebellion and anomie; after the film's release, the sale of black leather jackets and motorcycles rose dramatically as teens tried to imitate Marlon Brando's defiant swagger (Dirks). Jon Lewis explains this character's appeal: "Brando's Johnny epitomized a kind of fifties' male ego ideal, empowering the rigid, working-class, teenage male with the very masculinity a generation of fathers so obviously lacked" (29). Nevertheless, since the majority of the Black Rebels appear to be in their 30s (or even older), the film is not so much about teenagers, as it is about the clashing of values and tastes in America. The people of Wrightsville and the Black Rebels clash, ultimately, because they cannot understand each other: the Rebels see the townspeople as "squares" who will never accept them, while the townspeople see the Rebels as an exotic, frightening mob.

Much of this fear over youth subcultures and their strange new behaviors was rooted in the teenage hysteria for rock n' roll music. Throughout the mid- to late 1950s, adult society struggled to get a handle on the rock n' roll phenomenon by investigating it, explaining it, decrying it and/or exploiting it for profit. There was a general feeling in press coverage of rock n' roll (further backed up by actual incidents of teen violence and rioting), that it placed teenagers in a trancelike state, driving them to commit mindless acts of destruction. Throughout the late 1950s there were several high-profile incidents linking rock n' roll music, teenagers and acts of violence or destruction: in 1956 several people were injured when police used tear gas to break up a "rock 'n' roll riot" at a Fats Domino show in Fayetteville, North Carolina ("Gas Ends Rock n' Roll Riot" 20); in 1956 the antics of "rioting rock 'n' rollers" at a show in San Jose, California resulted in eleven injuries and \$3,000 worth of damage ("Rock n' Roll"); in 1956 a rock n' roll related riot in Asbury Park, New Jersey sent twenty-five teenagers to the hospital, causing Mayor Roland J. Hins to ban rock n' roll from all city dance halls ("Rock n' Roll"); in

Boston Roman Catholic leaders demanded that all rock music be boycotted (“Yeh-Heh-Heh-Hes, Baby”); and in 1957 15, 220 teenagers stood online to attend an all-day rock n’ roll show hosted by Alan Freed at the Paramount Theater in New York City, which resulted in several injuries when attendees tried to push past wooden barriers set up by the 175 policemen on the scene (Asbury 1). As a result, authority figures ranging from Police Superintendents to Admirals to mayors made headlines by banning rock n’ roll from civic buildings, teen-age dance parties and naval stations. In San Antonio, Texas rock n’ roll was even banned from swimming pool jukeboxes because the city council felt that “its primitive beat attracted ‘undesirable elements’ given to practicing their spastic gyrations in abbreviated bathing suits” (“Rock n’ Roll”).

Rock n’ roll first emerged in 1955, coinciding “with the demographic and sociocultural development of a white middle-class youth subculture” (Dotter 91), although the basis for rock n’ roll, rhythm and blues, had been on the “black charts”<sup>129</sup> since at least 1947. The music of R & B/rock n’ roll performers like the Chords, Fats Domino, Little Richard, Chuck Berry and others, with its emphasis on the “backbeat” (the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> beats of the measure) and use of vaguely licentious lyrics, were “perceived [by the white, adult population] as being overtly sexual in both lyrics and performance—and this bordered on immorality” (Friedlander 18-23). By contrast, the music targeted at white, middle class, teenagers in the late 1940s and early 1950s was characterized by sugary, beatless, romantic ballads by “song stylists” or crooners like Perry Como, Frank Sinatra,<sup>130</sup> Patty Page, Nat “King” Cole, and Rosemary Clooney, and was meant to appeal to both teens *and* their parents (Friedlander 26). It is not surprising then, that teenagers wishing to break away from their parents as well as the conservative environment of

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<sup>129</sup> Up until the mid-1950s the music industry categorized music by race. Thus *Billboard* had two different charts for popular music, white “pop” and black “R & B” (Doherty 54).

<sup>130</sup> Sinatra, who had been a teen idol only a few years previously, was famously quoted as saying that rock n’ roll was “the martial music of every side-burned delinquent on the face of the earth” (Samuels “Why They Rock” 19).

the 1950s would eventually gravitate towards rhythm and blues, which was later dubbed “rock n’ roll” (a slang term meaning “rowdy sex”). Though parents, religious groups, the mass media and even the record industry itself initially balked at the popularity of rock n’ roll, each of these groups, particularly the latter two, began to see the musical subculture for the cash cow that it was.

In order to exploit the emerging popularity of rock n’ roll, the record industry had to transform its subcultural signs into saleable objects (while of course still maintaining some semblance of their deviant image). One method for repackaging this cultural phenomenon was to label or redefine it as familiar (i.e., “white”) and nonthreatening. And since most white radio stations still refused to play songs by black artists, white music executives had to find some other way to capitalize on the rock n’ roll phenomenon. Their solution was to release “white” covers of R & B songs originally performed by black artists. This process occasionally entailed altering some of the songs’ sexually explicit lyrics in order to make them more acceptable to mainstream (i.e., white adult) listeners.<sup>131</sup> For example, African American artist Etta James’ hit “Roll with me Henry” (1954), a song in which James seems to be begging the titular gentleman to have sex with her, was changed to “Dance with me Henry” (1955) when it was covered by Georgia Gibbs, a white artist, for white radio stations.

By 1956 white rock n’ roll artists like Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis and Buddy Holly all had successful careers, but parents of (white, middle class) teenagers were nevertheless extremely disturbed by their music, both because of its ability to get teens to dance in a sexually

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<sup>131</sup> Of course, while racism was certainly a major factor in the outrage over rock n’ roll in the 1950s, economics also affected the mainstream recording industry’s reactions. Rock n’ roll’s success with small independent record companies initially threatened major recording labels. Likewise, since many rock n’ roll artists composed their own music and lyrics, this threatened the monopoly held by the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) (Szatmary 22-24). According Trent Hill, it is not an exaggeration to say that rock n’ roll “threatened an entire system of rigid hierarchies that dominated and defined all phases of musical production: the abyss between performer and audience, songwriter and performer, disc jockey and record publisher...” (62).

provocative manner and because of the music's roots in the black community. For example, in 1956 Asa Carter, executive secretary of the North Alabama White Citizens Council asked juke box operators in Birmingham and surrounding areas to throw out their rock n' roll records, believing that the music was a plot hatched by the NAACP to "infiltrate" Southern white teenagers ("Segregationist"). While Carter's campaign represents one far-fetched example of the racist underpinnings of the mainstream criticism of rock n' roll music, many articles devoted to outbreaks of violence associated with rock n' roll music make sure to mention the race of performers and/or the concert-goers, in addition to those involved in the violence. In a 1957 article about a teenage knife fight, the *New York Times* reported that teenagers involved in the melee had recently attended a "rock n' roll show featuring a majority of Negro performers" just before the fight ensued and that, according to the police on the scene, "The Negro youths were responsible for [the stabbings]" ("Rock 'n' Roll Fight Hospitalizes Youth" 23). And three months later the *Times* reported that knife fights and gunfire "erupted from a mass of 6,000 interracial rock n' roll fans..." ("Six Dallas Youths Hurt" 23). In both cases, the reporters felt a need to mention the fact that violence stemmed out of shows containing either black performers or which facilitated the mingling of black fans with white fans.

Rock n' roll, whether it was sung by a black or white artist, was generally perceived in the mid-1950s as the beginning of a vast social decline into immorality, juvenile crime, drug abuse, miscegenation and even widespread rioting. One tactic used to further demonize rock n' roll was to compare the music with "primitive" tribal rituals that puts impressionable listeners into a trancelike state and inspires deviant behaviors. One psychiatrist, Dr. Joost A.M. Meerlo of Columbia University, compared the teenage desire to dance to rock n' roll to the "contagious epidemic of dance fury" that "swept Germany and spread to all of

Europe” in the fourteenth century. Later, in the same *New York Times* article, Dr. Meerlo compared the effects of rock n’ roll on teenagers to “Tarantism,” an uncontrollable to desire to dance caused by a toxic tarantula bite. Dr. Meerlo also compared teen dancing to a “prehistoric rhythmic trance” that has gone “far beyond all accepted versions of human dancing” (Bracker 12). Outrageous as these beliefs might seem, they were not limited to Dr. Meerlo. A November 1956 issue of *Dig!* reprinted one particularly egregious newspaper article on this very subject. Under the headline “Has ‘Rhythm of Death’ Invaded America? ‘Voodoo Beat’ Blamed for Teen Age Riots Coast to Coast as Music-Maddened Maniacs Maul Many!” the article goes on to attribute the success of rock n’ roll to the “deadly rhythm of the jungles which sets off a hidden charge within the brain of its hearers, and incites them to acts of violence, murder, rape.” Rock n’ roll, the article reasons, “can make a murderer out of the nice kid next door” (qtd. on 39). And a *Time* magazine writer compared the behavior of rock n’ rolling teens to the attendees of a Hitler youth meetings (“Yeh-Heh-Heh-Hes, Baby”).

Throughout its history, rock n’ roll music “has undergone a unique evolution within contemporary popular culture: its artists and content have continually been a source of deviant subcultural identification, *and* each has been an object of commercial exploitation as well” (Dotter 87). Thus, while many segments of the adult population fretted that at best rock n’ roll music was decreasing the intelligence of the nation’s youth and, at worst, it was turning them into destructive, sex-obsessed maniacs, the film industry was busy capitalizing on the teenage craze for rock music. Although *Blackboard Jungle* (1955, Richard Brooks) was initially released as a “mainstream melodrama” about the problem of juvenile delinquency in urban schools (Doherty 76), the studio’s decision to play Bill Haley and the Comets’ single, “Rock Around the Clock” (1954), during the film’s opening credits (marking the first time that rock n’ roll music

appeared in a major motion picture), created some unexpected reactions among America's youth population. Indeed, rock n' roll historian Lillian Roxon called the song "the Marseillaise of the teenage revolution" (qtd. in Doherty 77). For example, it was widely reported that in Minneapolis, Minnesota a group of teenagers danced through the downtown smashing windows after seeing the film, causing a theater manager to withdraw the film from his theater ("Yeh-Heh-Heh-Hes, Baby"), and at Princeton University 1,000 undergraduates filled the streets, blocking traffic and turning on a fire hydrant, when the song was blasted via hi-fi sets on campus ("Princeton Suspends 4" 37). Once again, the idea that rock n' roll put teenagers into a deviance-inducing trance was promoted.

It was not just the inclusion of the "Rock Around the Clock" that made *Blackboard Jungle* appealing to teenagers. As Thomas Doherty points out, the film revealed "that the terms of the social contract between young and old have changed" (76) by depicting teenagers who fully reject the social, cultural and political tastes of their parent's generation. In one of the film's most famous scenes a nebbishy math teacher, Mr. Edwards (Richard Kiley), brings in his prized collection of jazz 78s to illustrate how jazz is based on mathematics. Mr. Edwards, clearly out of touch with the current generation, believes that he can connect with his students by bringing in his music collection, not realizing that none of his students would be fans of jazz (let alone *obscure* jazz recordings). While he has intended this lesson for his more "advanced" students, his remedial class of juvenile delinquents begs him to play "just one record" before they take their exam. When Mr. Edwards finally agrees and begins to play a rare jazz recording for the boys and to lecture them about the music, the boys become bored and loudly complain "How 'bout some bop?" The mayhem quickly escalates—marked by the film's shift from long shots to low angled close ups—as the boys smash his precious disks to the floor,

push Mr. Edwards around and dance wildly with each other. At one point the camera cuts from a helpless Mr. Edwards to a medium close up of Morales (Rafael Campos), drumming enthusiastically on his desk, with an ecstatic smile on his face. Although the boys are clearly rejecting the “square” music of their parent’s generation, they manage, via their destructive actions and the film’s menacing cinematography, to make this safe and familiar music appear foreign and threatening, both to Mr. Edwards and to the viewer. The final shot of the scene is an aerial view of the classroom, silent and empty, as Mr. Edwards stands alone, holding a shard of one of his jazz records—the sad aftermath of one miscalculating adult’s attempt to bridge the wide generation gap.

The success of both the film and Haley’s song with teen audiences (a 1956 survey found that *Blackboard Jungle* was the favorite film of high school students [Doherty 76]) indicated that teenagers, like the ones depicted in the film, wanted to differentiate themselves from their parents’ generation. However, the film’s narrative—which depicted teenagers beating up their teachers in back alleys, stalking and threatening a pregnant woman and attempting to rape a female teacher, generated protests from those who felt the film was not reflective of either the nation’s youth in general or of urban vocational schools in particular. Moral crusader Senator Estes Kefauver personally attacked the film for its emphasis on sex and violence (“The Manicured Fistful”) and the film was eventually withdrawn from the Venice Film Festival after United States Ambassador Clare Boothe Luce announced that she would not attend a showing of the film. Luce claimed that she did not want to lend “official sanction” to a film portraying such a “distorted view” of American life (“Mrs. Luce Upheld on Film Festival” 44). Despite or rather

because of this controversy,<sup>132</sup> movie executives immediately capitalized on *Blackboard Jungle*'s success by making a series of "rock n' roll" teenpics including *Rock Around the Clock* and *Shake, Rattle and Rock!* (1956, Edward L. Cahn).<sup>133</sup> While many of these films were nothing more than glorified musical revues, offering a loose narrative structure that allowed for the showcasing of various contemporary musical acts (see *Rock, Rock, Rock* [1956, Will Price]), a few others contained a more substantial narrativization of the rock n' roll phenomenon and its relationship to teenagers and deviance. For example, in *Go, Johnny, Go!*, Johnny's (Jimmy Clanton) deviance is explicitly tied to his preference for rock n' roll music over devotional church music. A flashback sequence, in which the audience learns about Johnny's days as a juvenile delinquent, opens with Johnny practicing with his church choir. When the kids begin playing and signing rock n' roll music on the church organ, they are sternly reprimanded by the priest. However, only Johnny is kicked out of the choir permanently. The priest's explanation for singling out Johnny is simple—he is an orphan and therefore, beyond adult control. Johnny's only other deviant act occurs when he plots to steal a gold pin for his girlfriend. However, this planned robbery is aborted when Alan Freed, who plays himself in the film, offers Johnny a record contract instead, thus cementing his fame in the present frame story. Thus in *Go, Johnny, Go!*, rock n' roll is both the primary signifier of teenage deviance as well as the juvenile delinquent's saving grace. Perhaps the film's ultimate message is that rock n' roll is only safe for teenagers when it is controlled by adults like Freed, who ultimately decides which teens are worth making into stars and which teens are simply delinquents.

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<sup>132</sup> Thomas Doherty believes that "At the time that kind of furor [generated by Luce] could mean an extra \$1 million in box office take. None of this was lost on exploitation moviemakers" (76).

<sup>133</sup> Although the success of *Blackboard Jungle* was responsible for the studios' decision to make rock n' roll teenpics, the film cannot be characterized as a rock n' roll film (Doherty 77). The only time rock n' roll music appears in the film is during its opening credits.

### 3.2.1 The JD Teenpic Cycle

When *The Wild One*, *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel without a Cause* (1955, Nicholas Ray), three films initially targeted at an adult audience, proved to be successful among teenage audiences, studios took notice and began to make films specifically for this new market demographic known as the American teenager. The cycle of JD teenpics<sup>134</sup> appearing in the mid- to late 1950s mark a continuance of as well as a significant departure from their cinematic forbearers, in that studios were finally making a concerted effort to create and market films directly to the teenage market. With the dissolution of the studio system (and with it a captive market for all studio products), the rising popularity of television, and the mass migration of middle-class families to the suburbs (and away from city-based movie theaters), studios had to find to new ways to attract their audiences. The newly discovered “teenager,” a consuming force with extra money and extra leisure time, was an ideal demographic to target. While earlier social problem films, like *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel without a Cause*, view youth behaviors from the standpoint of adult culture—as strange and threatening but ultimately “fixable”—the JD teenpics that followed this initial cycle attempt (some more successfully than others) to depict teenage behaviors from the point of view of teenagers.

In order to portray subcultural behaviors from a teenage perspective, it is necessary to make these behaviors— such as hot rod racing (*Hot Rod Girl* [1956, Leslie Martinson]), drinking and drug abuse (*High School Confidential!* [1958, Jack Arnold]) and premarital sex (*Date Bait* [1960, O. Dale Ireland])—appear as alluring but ultimately very dangerous. These scenes, the “money shots” of the JD teenpic, are usually staged with bravado:

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<sup>134</sup> Note: I include the aforementioned rock n’ roll teenpics under the subset of JD teenpics since creating, listening and dancing to rock n’ roll was a significant deviant activity in the 1950s.

the music is tense or epic, the cinematography becomes more stylized, and the dialogue becomes earnest. Furthermore, in order to squeeze the most drama out of these moments, the high stakes (death, jail time, loss of credibility among one's peers) of the activity being depicted must be stressed earlier in the film. For example in *Dino* (1957, Thomas Carr) we know that if the newly paroled Dino (Sal Mineo) goes through with his plan to rob a local service station, he will not only go back to jail, he will also forfeit the emotional progress he made with his psychiatrist, Dr. Sheridan (Brian Keith). Similarly in *Go Johnny Go!* we know that if Johnny goes through with his plan to steal a gold pin for his best girl he will lose his dream of becoming a famous rock n' roll star, a scenario highlighted by the fact that Johnny's song is playing on the radio (and generating a buzz among teenagers across the country as well as Alan Freed himself) at the exact moment that he stands contemplating the coveted pin in a jeweler's window. It is the portrayal of these high stakes that makes the teen deviance depicted on film appear even more exciting.

One subcultural behavior that became the subject of numerous JD teenpics was hot rod racing, a hobby that eventually swept the entire nation by the late 1950s.<sup>135</sup> Up until the early 1950s, the automobile was primarily a utilitarian vehicle. However, several factors, including the growth of the suburbs, President Eisenhower's aggressive initiative for highway construction, the establishment of the Big Three carmakers (General Motors, Ford and Chrysler), and an increase in televised advertisements for bigger, flashier, *faster* cars, America transitioned into the car culture it is today.<sup>136</sup> Unsurprisingly, like adults, teenagers were also fixated with car culture. As one teen explained in a letter to the editor of *Dig!* magazine in 1956 "Do you know

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<sup>135</sup> The craze can be attributed to the fetishization and glamorization of California and its attendant car culture in the 1960s. Clean cut California-based groups like the Beach Boys and Jan and Dean sang about hot rodding in hits like "Little Deuce Coup" (1963) and "Drag City" (1963) (Szatmary 76-77), thus rendering a subcultural activity, the obsession with souped up cars, an accepted national pastime.

<sup>136</sup> See *Tail Fins & Drive-ins* (1996, no director listed) for an account of America's postwar obsession with cars.

what the two most important things in the world are to a teen-age boy? First is a car to drive, and second is a license to drive it. Why? Because teen-age life centers around anything with four wheels and a motor, and if you don't have access to such a device, lots of people you'd like to impress simply don't know you exist" (Tubbs 23). In particular, teenagers became obsessed with hot rods: reading about them, building them and racing them. Numerous magazines devoted to hot rods began to appear on newsstands around this time (*Hot Rod*, *Rod & Custom*, *Car Speed and Style*, etc.). Furthermore, as early as 1956 teen magazines like *Dig!* and *Modern Teen* had their own "custom car editor," and featured regular articles on hot rods, driver safety and tips for customizing your car (a major aspect of the hot rod subculture [Gilbert 22]),<sup>137</sup> thus marking this activity as definitively belonging to youth culture.

This fetishization of hot rods as well as the potentially fatal activities associated with them, such as drag races and "chickee runs" (in which two cars head for a cliff or each other until one driver turns "chicken" and drives off course to avoid a certain death), was first translated into the language of cinema in the hit film, *Rebel without a Cause*. This famous scene is, I would argue, *the* seminal moment in the JD teenpic, a crystallization of the cycle's ability to translate the aura of teen rebellion into an alluring cinematic image. In fact, the success of *Rebel Without a Cause* and its acknowledgement of both teen angst and car culture, inspired and encouraged a cycle of JD teenpics, primarily B-films, centering around "hot rods" and "drag racing," including such imaginatively titled entries as *Hot Rod Rumble* (1957, Leslie Martinson), *Hot Rod Gang* (1958, Lew Landers), *Joy Ride* (1958, Edward Bernds) and *Teenage Thunder* (1957, Georg Tressler), among others. *Rebel without a Cause*'s now iconic race scene opens with Buzz (Corey Allen) and Jim (James Dean) preparing for their chickee run, which will take place

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<sup>137</sup> Magazines, like the October 1959 issue of *Modern Teen*, offered teens a way to customize their cars on the cheap, with ready-made decals (40-41).

on a seaside cliff. We see Jim contemplating the steep drop to the ocean as seen from the top of the cliff. The next shot reveals this drop from Jim's perspective, in a dizzying high angle shot. "That's the edge. That's the *end*" Buzz points out with a laugh. "Why do we do *this*?" Jim asks him. "You gotta do something, don't you?" Buzz replies. This exchange, beyond signifying the teen anomie so characteristic of the 1950s teenpic, also highlights the sense of dire self importance that appeals to a teenager's sensibilities. This is not the conversation of two boys who have the ability to choose whether or not they will participate in such a dangerous game. Rather, the boys sense that they *must* participate in this chickee race; lacking any other responsibility or commitment, the race is something they can commit to with the gravitas of a soldier heading off to war.

When the boys approach their respective vehicles, excitement ripples through the crowd of teenage onlookers, who quickly run to their places on the sidelines. Several teens drive their cars into a line in order to illuminate the improvised racetrack with their headlights which makes the next few shots of the chickee run scene appear like a stage performance. When Judy (Natalie Wood) instructs the crowd "Hit your lights!" the dirt road is suddenly illuminated. In an extreme long shot we see Judy, who looks small and insignificant, even as she commands the makeshift spotlights with her arms raised up. When Judy gives the signal, again seen from a high angle shot, the camera cuts to a close up of car tires squealing. Throughout this sequence the music intensifies, becoming louder and more frantic. As the cars race past Judy her expression is one of sheer pleasure and excitement; she turns to chase after the boys as they race out of the shot and towards the edge of the cliff. In fact, the viewer is meant to take up Judy's viewing position as she thrills over the vision of two tough, strong young men, willing to place themselves in real danger, merely to prove who is tougher and stronger (and deserving of Judy's

affections). What could be more exhilarating than that? The race ends tragically of course, with Buzz getting his sleeve caught on the car door, forcing him to go off the cliff with his car. However, his death only highlights the real stakes involved in such a race, making the spectacle all the more alluring to the teen spectator—both within and outside of the film. Teenagers who participated in drag racing may not have had a literal death wish, but the fact that death was a possibility elevated their antics to the level of something more epic than pointless teenage horseplay. Such self destructive behavior is, according to Donna Gaines, a direct result of the boredom, isolation, alienation and anomie of suburban teen life (48). In other words, middle class youth engage in delinquent behavior not so much because of economic need but primarily in defiance of adult rules (51).

Another important aspect of the JD teenpic is that it must present “authentic” depictions of teenage subcultural activities in order to attract the capricious teen audience. After all, teenagers are not likely to support a film which purports to address their needs but portrays slang, music or clothing trends which are out of date. In *High School Confidential*, for example, a young teacher, Mrs. Williams (Jan Sterling), teaches an English lesson on contemporary slang terms, offering definitions for words like “square,” “chicken,” “doll,” and “scram.”<sup>138</sup> When she leaves the classroom momentarily, another student, J.I. (John Drew Barrymore), posited as the “hippest” member of the student body by virtue of his position as leader of the Wheelers and Dealers gang, provides the class with a corrective lesson to the teacher’s “old school jive.” Here the film offers its teenage viewers a glimpse of an all-teenage universe—the high school classroom—populated with a range of teen types. When J.I. stands up in the front of the class to

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<sup>138</sup> This attempt to bring the audience up-to-date on the terminology of a new subculture is repeated in the 1980s and 1990s when many journalists were compelled to include a “rap dictionary” as a sidebar to articles about the new musical genre. For example in 1990 *Newsweek* article, “Decoding Rap Music,” the authors deploy contemporary rap vernacular, and then provide translations for these words in parentheses (Gates and Smith).

deliver his history lesson, we see him in a medium shot, reclining lengthwise on the teacher's desk. The vertical compositions we saw earlier, during Mrs. Williams' lecture on slang, are replaced with horizontal lines to compliment the favored position of the contemporary teenager: relaxing. As he delivers slang-heavy lines like "One swingin' day when Chris [Columbus] was sittin' at the beach, goofin', he dug that the world was round," the camera cuts to medium close ups of his teenage audience, who whoop and laugh with each joke. These teenagers are stand-ins for the film audience, informing us that this is the language and humor that appeals to today's teenagers. J.I. rewrites the story of Christopher Columbus' discovery that the world is round as a teenager's easy epiphany, arrived at while relaxing at the beach. History is made, not through the hard work and self abnegation characterized by the Protestant work ethic and validated by adult culture, but rather, by teenage "goofin'." Here the adult universe, in which history is made, written and passed on by adults, is overtaken by teenagers and their specialized language. This scene highlights the teenager's command of the world; although adults cannot grasp teen culture (evidenced by Mrs. Williams' failure to capture the classroom's imagination with her lecture on slang), teens understand adult culture all too well. However, it is also significant that this moment of teenage victory over adult hegemony was written, directed and produced (as were all 50s teenpics) by the very "squares" the film ridicules, namely, adults.

*Rock Around the Clock* (1956, Fred F. Sears), the first teenpic to capitalize on the rock n' roll craze, works in a similar fashion, telling the story of two (adult) big band promoters who are frustrated by the decreasing numbers in their dance halls. It appears that nobody wants to go out dancing anymore. But then, one night, while traveling through a small town on their way to New York City, they happen upon a town dance packed with grooving teenagers. The men, who are clearly baffled by the teenagers' ecstasy over the featured band, Bill Haley and the

Comets, are initially depicted as clueless squares, especially when the teens' "jive" talk proves incomprehensible. For instance, when one of the adults, Steve (Johnny Johnston), asks the kids why they are clearing the floor for a pair of dancers, he is informed "Dig. When the most is on the floor, we give them room." Even though the adult promoters eventually catch on, and indeed, profit, from this newly "discovered" rock n' roll subculture, their initial disorientation, along with the film's use of supposedly up-to-date lingo, music and dance steps, provides hip teens with a mirror of their contemporary activities and square teens with a model to emulate (or scorn, if the teen really *is* a square). As Doherty points out, the narrative of the teenpic "provides at least a recognition, at most a validation, of the subcultural ways of the target audience" (85).

Both *Rock Around the Clock* and *High School Confidential!* illustrate the dual function of JD teenpics –to exploit teen interest in subcultural behaviors and to further disseminate these subcultural styles to a broader audience (so that they can continue to profit from their broader exposure). Similarly, in *Rock Around the Clock*, the entrance of the adult squares into the dance hall provides an opportunity for the display of teenage subcultural style, much as an ethnographer might record the tribal dances of a foreign culture. For example, after failing to label the sounds they are hearing ("It isn't boogie, it isn't jive and it isn't swing. Its sort of all of them" says the befuddled Steve), Mike (John Archer) taps an upside down teenager on the shoulder and asks her to name the music. "Its rock n' roll brother," she explains, amid her dance-generated ecstasies, "and we're *rrrrockin'* tonight!" This comment leads to a series of aerial shots of the dance floor in which nameless teenage couples perform contemporary dance steps. These shots are alternately cut with views of Bill Haley and the Comets performing and floor-level shots of the dancers from the waist down. This extended dance/performance sequence, since it is not explicitly filmed from the perspective of our adult tour guides, Steve and

Mike, serves instead as pure spectacle. These scenes, which pepper the film and do nothing to further the film's plot or to develop its characters, are, in reality, the primary draw of this film. In fact, when *Rock Around the Clock* was marketed, its distributor, Columbia Pictures, did not emphasize its story, director or its actors; rather both of its theatrical poster highlight the various acts that perform in the film, like Bill Haley and the Comets and The Platters. And its taglines, including "It's the Whole Story of Rock n' Roll!" or "The Screen's First Great Rock n' Roll Feature!" address the film's appeal to teenage subcultural tastes. In both films, these moments of teen spectacle are its *raison d'être*, and are also the primary way that subcultural style is disseminated to a larger audience. After watching *High School Confidential*, teens who were not in the know could catch up on the argot of their generation, while audiences for *Rock Around the Clock* could learn the latest dance steps.

Since Mrs. Williams, Steve and Mike are initially depicted as dopes, adults who desperately want to connect with today's teenagers, but who are barred from a true communion with them due to their age, it is easy to forget that both of these films—and all teenpics—were produced, written and directed by adults looking to exploit the teenage zeitgeist. Despite having the patina of being "hip," films like *High School Confidential!* and *Rock Around the Clock* are always already "square." Consequently, in order to enjoy these films teenagers must have had to undergo a willing suspension of disbelief, much as viewers of classical Hollywood films must ignore the fact that they are watching a constructed piece of studio product in order to be properly swept along by the film's fantasy world. For teenage consumers of teenpics, these films offered a fantasy of a teen-centric world in which adults exist as active tormentors or flimsy annoyances. But in order to enjoy this fantasy, teenagers had to disregard their knowledge of the teenpic's origins.

As I mentioned, the emergence of the teen subculture in the 1950s was predicated on the establishment of a “generational consciousness.” Teens were aware of themselves as an age group, one that was separate from adults and from children. However, Hall and Jefferson are quick to point out that this shift to age-based classifications did not completely nullify class distinctions. Hence, another important aspect of the JD teenpic was its fixation on class differences among teenagers.<sup>139</sup> For example, A.I.P.’s *Teenage Doll* (1957, Roger Corman), depicts the antagonism between the Black Widows, an all girl gang, and Barbara Bonney (June Kenney), a “square” who gets mixed up in the gang’s affairs by dating “bad boy” Eddie, (John Brinkley), leader of the Vandals. In *Teenage Doll* the distinction between good kids and bad kids, between squares and gang members, boils down to a distinction between the classes. All of the Black Widows (with the exception of Betty [Barbara Wilson], a policeman’s daughter), come from poor, working class and/or destructive, broken homes. As the film opens we see a man tossing a bucket of dirty water into a back alley, revealing the body of a dead teenage girl, laid out like the trash that surrounds her. As the film’s square up explains “What happens to the girl is unimportant...what happens to the others is more than important; it is the most vital issue of our time.” In other words, we are not to mourn the death of this low class hoodlum (an identity signified by the victim’s revealing clothing and overdone make up), who has become literal street trash; we must instead concentrate on those girls who are worth saving, namely those in the middle class, like Barbara.

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<sup>139</sup> Although many JD teenpics addressed issues of class difference, remarkably few touched on the hot button issue of race and delinquency. *This Rebel Breed* (1960, Richard L. Bare), released comparatively late in the cycle, is one of the few JD teenpics to include non-white characters and to explicitly recognize that 1950s teenagers, like their adult counterparts, were engaged in America’s current racial tensions. The film is somewhat ambitious in its attempt to cover the strained relations between black, white, Asian and Mexican teenagers, as well as issues like interracial relationships and passing as well as standard JD teenpic fare like premarital sex, abortions, drug use, and gangs.

Before we ever see Barbara's home life, we know she is a middle class "good girl," a square, by her full-skirted dress, demure cardigan and the perfect pin curls in her hair. By contrast, the Widows wear sneakers, jeans and matching members-only jackets. Significantly, the one Widow who is able to be "saved" at the end of the film, Betty, is the only one who wears a skirt throughout the film. Of course what is interesting and potentially subversive about *Teenage Doll* is that while it posits the majority of the Widows as beyond saving (due to the fact that they are already "too rotten to save," as one girl's older sister puts it), middle class life does not appear to be any more enticing. For example, Lori (Sandra Smith), the nastiest Widow, is shown to have the most aberrant home life. She lives alone in a dilapidated shack with her baby sister, who sits alone in the dark all day chewing on cardboard while Lori runs with the Widows. The scene in which we meet Lori's sister is over the top and grotesque: the sister has dirty, matted hair, crawls around on the floor and begs Lori for "breakfast," though it is clearly dinnertime (Lori eventually tosses the little girl a box of stale crackers which she eagerly devours). As disquieting as this scene is, Barbara's home life is painted as equally disturbing. When we first see the Bonney living room, in a wide shot, it is roomy, neat and quiet. Mr. Bonney appears in the foreground, working at a desk. The peaceful, "normal" tone of this scene changes quickly, however, when Barbara's mother, Estelle Bonney (Dorothy Neumann) enters the frame. Although she is middle-aged, Estelle is dressed up like a young girl: she wears a demure, flower print dress with puff sleeves, her hair is done up in pigtails and a large satin bow is tied around her head. At one point, when she scolds Barbara that "A sixteen-year-old girl shouldn't be out where a truck can hit her," Barbara has to correct her: "I'm eighteen mother." This exchange confirms that Estelle is suffering from delusions or memory loss. We soon find out that, like her daughter, Estelle was once in love with a man she describes as "cheap,

worthless and treacherous,” a “bad boy” like Eddie. Estelle’s clothing choices, a caricature of sweet, girlish domesticity, reflects her own arrested development, caused by her imprisonment in a sanitized, unfulfilling, overly structured, middle class relationship. We get the impression that had Estelle stayed with her bad boy, her true love, she would be a very different (and happier) person today. Much like Jim Stark in *Rebel Without a Cause*, the stifling WASP world of the middle class home drives Barbara to seek excitement, just as her mother did a generation ago. As Doherty explains “The juvenile delinquent of the 1950s was a more terrifying crime problem [than in the 30s and 40s] because he resisted a reassuring socioeconomic analysis, especially if (as was increasingly the case) he came from a fairly well-off background” (124). Indeed, Eddie hits the nail on the head when he later teases Barbara “My Mommy and Daddy don’t love me or understand me so I gotta go out and be a JD!”

### **3.3 FROM THE MARGINS TO THE CENTER: SHAPING THE 1990S TEEN SUBCULTURE**

As with the JD teenpic, the emergence of the ghetto action cycle is strongly tied to the identification of a newly discovered deviant subculture, namely hip hop fans and the figure of the (black) urban, juvenile delinquent, often labeled (in films and by the media) as a gang banger or gangsta. And like the 1950s teenager, the 1990s teenager cut a menacing figure in the news. Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner describe the panic in this way in their introduction to *Freakonomics*:

Anyone living in the United States in the early 1990s and paying even a whisper of attention to the nightly news or a daily paper could be forgiven for having been

scared out of his skin. The cause was the so-called superpredator. For a time, he was everywhere. Glowering from the cover of newsweeklies. He was a scrawny, big-city teenager with a cheap gun in his hand and nothing in his heart but ruthlessness. There were thousands out there just like him, we were told, a generation of killers about to hurl the country into deepest chaos. (1-2)

In the 1980s discourses about the ghetto, crime and the figure of the gang banger were being widely circulated in politics, popular music, television and film. Of course, the primary catalyst for a moral panic is the media, which has historically devoted an inordinate amount of energy to reporting on incidents of deviance. Cohen believes that we learn from these mediated sources “about the boundaries beyond which one should not venture, about the shapes that the devil can assume” (17). Ed Guerrero adds that in the late 1980s the media were offering America two vastly different images of the black population: the “opulent, soothing image of a black professional class” exemplified by texts like *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) and the “stark, real-time, genocidal slaughter of urban blacks” replayed on the ten o’clock news. “It is little wonder” he continues, “that by the beginning of the 1990s, blacks felt that they existed in the dominant social imagination as media-constructed ‘stars’ and fantasy figures or as criminals, while according to almost every social-material index, the quality of black life in this country steadily declined” (163).<sup>140</sup> Much as the teenager in general was the object of intense fear, adulation and media scrutiny in the 1950s, the black, urban (usually male) teenager became a demographic worthy of media exploitation in the 1980s and early 1990s.

As I outlined in Chapter 1, one of the first sources of deviant images of the black inner city teen was the Reagan administration. According to Herman Gray, the Reagan

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<sup>140</sup> See Chapter 1 for more on the socioeconomic state of post-industrial Los Angeles ghetto.

administration enlisted specific discourses about blackness in order to mobilize support for the administration's neoconservative goals of: dismantling "big government," the welfare state and affirmative action; reinstating a strong military; creating an "unfettered free market"; and returning to a utopian vision of America signified by the Eisenhower-era ideals of family, tradition and religion: "Discursively, then, the conservative Republican strategy to 'get America moving' relied heavily on dramatic and racialized media images of an isolated and pathological underclass trapped in a culture of poverty" (23). Specifically, in the 1980s the Reagan administration declared a "war on drugs," which, though admirable in concept, was misguided in practice. Rather than addressing and correcting the problems which led inner city residents to sell or use drugs, the administration treated Los Angeles as if it were a literal war zone, subjecting its residents to intense monitoring by police helicopters, high-tech electronic surveillance and even small tanks armed with battering rams (Kelley 193). This troubling imagery, which circulated in nightly newscasts, helped to further criminalize the nation's inner-city communities. Though inner cities were certainly suffering and in need of the government's aid, the demonization of these areas created a crisis which the Reagan administration could then "solve" for the American public through a more visible police presence and a "zero tolerance" policy towards drug dealers and users.

The Reagan (and Bush) administration's manipulation of and influence on media images throughout the 1980s has been discussed at length in numerous texts,<sup>141</sup> but some of the more salient examples include: the invocation of the "welfare queen" who abuses the beneficence of the state, campaign ads featuring mug shots of Willie Horton as a symbol of the

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<sup>141</sup> Herman Gray's *Watching Race*, Todd Boyd's *Am I Black Enough for You?* (1997), Robin D.G. Kelley's *Race Rebels*, Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film* (2001), Paula Massood's *Black City Cinema* (2003), etc.

failure of the “liberal” legal system, and the promotion of “model minorities” like the neoconservative Clarence Thomas, an act which implied that “[b]lackness was not a category requiring structural adjustments for the disadvantages of historic and systemic group disenfranchisement and social inequality” (Gray 19). In other words, almost everything currently “wrong” with America, including crime, drugs, unemployment and teen pregnancy, could be pinned on a demonized black underclass, which further justified neoconservative economic and social policies. By placing this blame on some individuals while simultaneously celebrating and promoting the success of others (like Thomas), the administration could escape accusations of racism (Gray 32). Cornel West claims that black conservative leaders added to these public discourses by arguing that “the decline of values such as patience, deferred gratification, and self reliance have resulted” (84) in the problems experience by the black community throughout the 1980s and 1990s, while ignoring the fundamental structural issues which have led to these problems (such as the loss of manufacturing and industrial jobs in urban areas coupled with the mechanization of southern agriculture).

Much as book-length studies and magazine articles devoted to discussions of the “teenager” in the 1940s and 1950s encouraged this group to view themselves as a distinct subculture, the demonization of ghetto residents by government agencies, politicians and the media, led young black males (and later, females), to view themselves as a criminalized Other, separate and marginalized from mainstream culture. This Othering of the inner city community continued on into the 1990s, with the Clinton administration’s policies. Though this administration at first appeared to take a more liberal approach to America’s “war on drugs,” with its emphasis on drug treatment (Gordon 34), it nevertheless resorted to the familiar discourses of individual morality, “with its stress on personal responsibility as the principal

solution to society's ills." This move, according to Diana Gordon, allows politicians to "slide easily from drugspeak to more general perorations against violence and gangs" (36). In fact, since the mid-1970s politicians have exploited the "crime issue" as an easy method of gaining public support, despite the fact that the most critical social problems, particularly during the Clinton Presidency, were education, the economy, employment and health care (Poveda 75-76), rather than crime. Here again, drugs, violence, crime, all part of America's presumed moral decay, are coded as pressing social problems that are containable because they emanate from "a relatively small, hard-core group in our midst whose evil personal and social characteristics account for crime" (Poveda 79). This "small, hard-core" group is more often than not aligned with a young, black underclass.

In addition to this negative media coverage, the hip hop generation, like the 1950s rock n' roller, was recognized as a distinct subculture, marked by the appearance of *The Source* magazine in 1988. *The Source*, which describes itself as a magazine about hip hop music, culture and politics, was founded in 1988 by Jon Shecter, a white hip hop fan, while he was still a student at Harvard (Samuels *That's the Joint!* 152). Beginning modestly as a college newsletter, *The Source* quickly became one of the largest, most influential hip hop magazines in the United States. Although it can be argued that it is problematic to have a magazine for fans of black music run by a white, middle class Harvard graduate,<sup>142</sup> the appearance of *The Source* was nevertheless significant for hip hop fans because it was dependable source, not just for information about the rap music scene, but also about rap's place in the contemporary cultural climate, America's reaction to rap music and its fans, and the contemporary political scene

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<sup>142</sup> Shecter, who is no longer editor of *The Source*, has been the subject of much criticism. David Samuels cites an editorial that appeared in a black newspaper, *The City Sun*, which criticized Shecter for being white and Jewish. (*That's the Joint!* 152).

(particularly its impact on inner city black youth). It provided youth with a forum for discussing hip hop culture as well as their place in contemporary society. For example, in the wake of the 1992 Los Angeles uprising/riots, one youth wrote the following letter to editor “Why does it seem that to the U.S. government, an African American life is worth less than a white person’s life? Ice Cube couldn’t have said it better when he said the purpose of the cops are, ‘to serve, protect and break a niggaz’ neck’” (Hughes 11). *The Source*, like teen magazines from the 1950s, spoke to 1990s youth as a special like-minded community. In its editorial pages youth engaged in debates about race, gender and sexuality in the hip hop community, current events and of course, their favorite artists.

The success of *The Source* led to other hip hop-oriented publications like the British-based *Hip Hop Connection* (1988- ), *Vibe* (1993-) and the Bay Area-based *4080* (1994-1997). According to S. Craig Watkins, the appearance of these magazines marked a change in the once “hidden” economy of hip hop culture:

Emerging alongside the growth and popularity of the movement was a more formal hip-hop economy, one that developed surprisingly strong synergies with corporate America. In this corporate-driven climate, hip hop’s influence widened considerably as a generation, who in another time and place would ordinarily be confined to society’s margins, gained unprecedented access to print, music, video, and other media. (*Hip Hop Matters* 58)

The presence and commercial viability of the hip hop subculture was further recognized in 1989 when MTV premiered the popular program *Yo! MTV Raps*. Although MTV was initially reluctant to embrace rap music, fearing it would alienate their primarily white, middle class audience, the success of the program proved just the opposite: “With ‘Yo! MTV Raps,’ rap

became for the first time the music of choice in white suburbs of middle America...the show's audience was primarily white, male, suburban and between the ages of 16 and 24..." (Samuels *That's the Joint* 152). In fact, the show became a "how to" manual of hip hop style, allowing viewers to keep abreast of the latest urban slang and fashions.

Although rap music had existed since the late 1970s, it did not cause a major stir in the media until 1) it became associated primarily with the genre of "gangsta rap" and 2) white middle class kids started listening to it. Just as entertainment executives were caught off guard when white teenagers fell in love with rock n' roll music, which was believed to be primitive, bestial, and low class, they were likewise surprised when, in the early 1990s, gangsta rap became extremely popular among white suburbanites, the least likely market for a musical idiom rooted in the angst of black males railing against the injustices of a white-dominated society. And much as those 1950s teenagers could make their rebel status clear through clothing, music and language choices, 1990s suburban teens could express their angst through an adoption of hip hop style. It is generally believed that teenagers (of all races) are attracted to rap (and gangsta rap in particular) for this reason. Schoolly D, credited with being one of the first gangsta rappers, theorized about the suburban teenager's attraction to rap music in a 1990 interview: "It's teenage rebellion. They've got to get something out of their system. Their mom told 'em they got to mow the lawn, and they want to be mad, so they go listen to Eazy-E and get it out of their system" (qtd. in Mills 39). Beyond the music, argues Marc Spiegler, white teens are attracted to hip hop culture because it allows them to be a part of the black ghetto subculture (if only in their minds): "The attraction...is part admiration, part fascination, and part fear" (3). Dick Hebdige contends that this exchange between the black and white communities is characteristic of the history of subcultural style; for mainstream white culture the black individual is "the quintessential

subterranean, embodying all those values (the search for adventure and excitement) which coexist with and undercut the sober positives of mainstream society (routinization, security, etc.)” (44).

The history of rap music illuminates some of the problems that can arise when a subculture is adopted and consumed by a more mainstream audience. Although rap music originated as party music, as the soundscape to the visual display of the breakdancer’s prowess, as early as 1982, with the release of Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five’s “The Message” (1982),<sup>143</sup> rap music was also being used in service of illuminating the state of the inner city (Mills 32). By the late 1980s, with the advent and popularity of gangsta rap, rap music as a whole soon became associated with gritty tales of urban struggle and violence (though not all late 1980s rap music served this function). What is problematic about this association, however, is that it reduces a text which is, first and foremost, intended as creative expression, as *music* to be listened to and enjoyed, to a political tract: “For all the implicit and explicit politics of rap lyrics, Hip Hop must be understood as a sonic force more than anything else” (Kelley “Looking” 130). Beyond the problems inherent in equating musical entertainment with reality is the politics of consumption; by listening to these records, consumers believe that they understand what inner city life must be like. Rap producer Hank Shocklee explains “If you’re a suburban white kid and you want to find out what life is like for a black city teenager, you buy a record by N.W.A. It’s like going to an amusement park and getting on a roller coaster ride—records are safe, they’re controlled fear, and you always have the choice of turning it off” (qtd. in Samuels *That’s*

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<sup>143</sup> Sample lyrics include “Broken glass everywhere/ People pissin’ on the stairs, you know they just don’t care /I can’t take the smell, can’t take the noise / Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice /Rats in the front room, roaches in the back/ Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat/ I tried to get away but I couldn’t get far /’cuz a man with a tow truck repossessed my car.”

*the Joint* 153). Like drag racing and chickee runs in the 1950s, gangsta rap offered contemporary teens a sense of danger, of transgressing social boundaries.

Many rap industry insiders began to speculate in the early 1990s that by the time a rap record reaches gold (500,000 units sold), white consumers are making at least sixty percent of that album's purchases (Upski 64), a phenomenon described euphemistically in the music industry as the "crossover" market. This widespread acceptance and embrace of hip hop culture was strongly tied to its redefinition as safe for white, middle class consumption. Not surprisingly, one of the first ways that rap was made palatable to the mainstream was through the promotion of white rap artists, such as Vanilla Ice (aka, Robert Van Winkle) whose platinum-selling album *To the Extreme* (1990), paved the way for white gangsta rappers.<sup>144</sup> Vanilla Ice's chart topping single "Ice Ice Baby" discussed shootings, carjackings, drugs and "packing heat" (carrying a gun), thus placing his music in the burgeoning genre of gangsta rap. Since the gangsta often establishes his credibility by identifying his/her neighborhood of origin, Vanilla Ice claimed, both in his music<sup>145</sup> as well as his interviews, to hail from Miami, Florida and told the *New York Times* that he was involved with gangs and was "stabbed five times" (qtd. in Charnas 19). Of course, the rapper was later famously exposed in several publications (*Dallas Morning Herald*, *Village Voice*, etc.) as growing up in the suburbs of Dallas, Texas, a location which, at least in 1990, was hardly identified with gangsta culture (Chilly E 12).

Despite the ridicule Vanilla Ice endured, particularly in less mainstream publications like *The Village Voice* and *The Source*, music executives quickly sought out white

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<sup>144</sup> There were successful white rappers prior to the appearance of Vanilla Ice, such as the Beastie Boys and 3rd Bass, both of which spawned a series of imitators. However, neither group achieved the same levels of commercial success (*To the Extreme* sold 7 million copies) nor the amount of (negative) press coverage as Vanilla Ice did in 1990 (Dennis 54).

<sup>145</sup> One line from "Ice Ice Baby" is "Miami's on the scene just in case you didn't know it /My town that created all the bass sound."

rap artists for their rosters, much as 1950s music executives had white crooners like Pat Boone cover R&B songs originally recorded by black artists. In October 1991 *The Source* even featured an article on the topic, “The Great White Hope,” which attempted to understand the phenomenon of white rappers and to see if artists like Icy Blu (a 16-year-old cheerleader from Connecticut), Jesse Jaymes (a 22-year-old from Roslyn, NY) and Marky Mark (later to be known as the actor, Mark Wahlberg) were marketing ploys or “simply a part of rap’s inevitable acceptance into Americana” (Dennis 52). Dennis argues that, as with white covers of black rock n’ roll singles in the 1950s, the objectionable content of rap music appears less threatening when it issues from the lips of white artists: “As long as America fails to live up to its potential, white artists who produce a version of Black music that both panders and is palatable to the mass audience (read: white people) will have an unspoken advantage over those who don’t” (55). In an earlier *Source* article from January of 1991, “Vanilla Ice: Our Worst Nightmare?” Dan Charnas invokes the specter of Elvis (a common trope deployed in discussions of Vanilla Ice) when explaining that historically, tastemakers have believed that:

for a vibrant African American art form to go “pop” (i.e., attract the attention of middle-American whites), white people *need* to hear it translated by desexed, sissified, non-threatening dancin’-n-singin’ vaudevillians (could be Little Richard, Michael Jackson or Hammer), or crotch-grinding sexually exaggerated dirty white boys who crossed the tracks one too many times (could be Elvis, Dino or Vanilla Ice). (19)

Vanilla Ice, as well as many of his aforementioned white contemporaries, did not experience any form of longevity on the charts, mainly because rap’s central appeal is its “authenticity.” Once Vanilla Ice was proven to be “inauthentic” he became a popular culture punch line.

In response to *The Source*'s coverage of this subject, fans routinely wrote in to express their own opinions on the white co-optation of black music. In September 1991 one fan wrote "Our music is one of the greatest curiosities that white people will never fully understand or experience" (12) while another letter from December of that same year was more forceful "I think it is all a bunch of bullshit the way all these punk no-talent motherfuckin [sic] white boys are trying to cash in on a true art form! All they are doing is exploiting the music!" (King 12). Of course, many of these letters also expressed hurt that white rappers (and by extension, white fans of rap), were viewed as exploitative poseurs or "wiggers." One fan complained: "You don't need to be a certain color to understand hip-hop" (Sullivan 12), while another reasoned "It seems that from Dennis' [who wrote a mocking *Source* article about white rap fans] tone he feels that white people should buy the records but not be involved in rap" (Book 12). Another fan was more incensed, "Whatever happened to One Nation Under a Groove? And yes, I'm white. And guess what? I'm a Jew too! But I can rhyme my ass off" (Dirt 12).

By the mid-1990s, the once marginal "hard core lifestyle" characterized by gangsta rap (listening to it, creating it, and adhering, or pretending to adhere, to the violent lifestyle it espouses) became such an important part of the white teen experience that it became "a music-industry maxim that for a rap record to go platinum, it must sell strongly among white youths" (Spiegler). 1990s music executives, like their predecessors in the 1950s, understood that since they could not divert the white teen market from gangsta rap, they might as well exploit it. However, despite its acceptance among teenagers of all races and backgrounds, the adult, primarily white, mainstream, was extremely disapproving of rap music, particularly in its early 90s gangsta rap form. While these objections are certainly rooted in the fact that rap lyrics can be alternately violent, misogynistic, homophobic and nihilistic (a statement which could be made

about most subcultural music, including rock n' roll, punk and heavy metal), the mainstream was also reacting to the political content of gangsta rap and its frank discussion about urban living conditions (Ice Cube's "Once Upon a Time in the Projects" [1990]), racism (Tupac's "Trapped" [1992]), police brutality (Boogie Down Productions' "Who Protects Us from You?" [1989]) and government hypocrisy (Ice-T's "New Jack Hustler" [1991]). As a result, the genre became the subject of intense scrutiny, with several high profile news stories devoted to its content, its presumed effects on fans, and on the antics of the rappers themselves. In fact, there were so many instances of the media criticizing or misreporting on rap music that *The Source* eventually created a monthly feature entitled "Media Watch: A review of the coverage of Rap Music in the Mainstream Media" while *Hip Hop Connection*, a British magazine, also had a similar feature entitled "Media Assassin."

To name just a few high profile stories: in 1989 N.W.A.'s record label, Priority Records, received a letter from Milt Ahlerich, an FBI assistant director, objecting to the content of their popular song "Fuck tha Police";<sup>146</sup> in 1988 an 18-year-old was stabbed to death during a rap concert at Nassau Coliseum; in 1990 the Florida obscenity case over the lyrics to 2 Live Crew's *As Nasty as We Wanna Be* (1989) was covered by most major news outlets;<sup>147</sup> in 1991 nine youths were trampled to death at a charity basketball game with rappers (Powell 52); and in 1994 there were Senatorial Youth and Urban Crime Sub-Committee hearings on gangsta rap (Rose "Rap Music"). Because of these incidents and the growing concern over the popularity of

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<sup>146</sup> In September 1990 *The Source* printed an article about an "unconfirmed" Department of Justice memorandum about seven rap artists (including acts like NWA, Public Enemy and Ice T) which would then form the basis of a report to Congress. Though the author was unable to determine if the document actually existed, she speculates that its purpose was create further support for the anti-rap movement (Pollack 20).

<sup>147</sup> In 1990 *The New York Times* printed over ninety stories on 2 Live Crew, including "Shock Greets Banning of a Rap Album" (McFadden A10) and "An Album is Judged Obscene; Rap: Slick, Violent, Nasty and, Maybe Hopeful" (Pareles 1). There was also extended coverage in *The Village Voice*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and Florida-based papers like *Miami News Times* and *Ft. Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel* ("The Luke Trial" 22).

rap music among teens of all classes and races, newspapers began to feature regular articles which both implicitly and explicitly linked up the subject of youth, rap music, and violence. According to Tricia Rose, such media coverage is “part of a long-standing sociologically based discourse that considers black influences a cultural threat to American society” (“Hidden” 241). For example, in 1992 a Texas state trooper, Bill Davidson, was shot by a 19-year-old who claimed that the Tupac Shakur album *2pacalypse Now* (1991) influenced him to commit the murder. *The Washington Post*’s coverage of the story includes an article with the headline “Music to Kill Cops By? Rap Song Blamed in Texas Trooper’s Death” (Phillips G1). Though the article itself is objective in its presentation of the facts, the headline (which by nature must be attention grabbing), makes a simple equation between rap music and murder.

The mainstream media’s coverage of rap music almost always focused on the sensational, often reporting popular opinion as fact. For example, in 1990 *Newsweek* ran a lengthy article entitled “The Rap Attitude”<sup>148</sup> in which the authors describe rap in terms similar to those used by anti-rock n’ roll pundits in the 1950s “Their music is a rhythmic chant, rhyme set to a drum solo, a rant from the streets about gunning down cops” (Adler and Foote). Throughout the piece rap and its “attitude” of defiance and swagger is contrasted with more “civilized” culture, such as the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. Furthermore, the authors take on an incredulous tone when describing how some rappers claim that their work represents an artistic vision or political statement. As in the 1950s, contemporary youth music, race and class are all linked up with a culture of empty violence headed for annihilation. The authors describe

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<sup>148</sup> The May 1990 issue of *The Source* devoted its “Media Watch” feature to this article. Indeed, the article was incendiary enough to provoke the ire of music columnists from *Entertainment Weekly*, *USA Today*, *Houston Post*, *New York Times*, *Village Voice*, *New York Daily News*, *Billboard* and *The Boston Globe*. *The Source*’s article also features the following quote from Russell Simmons of Def Jam Recordings: “This overheated rhetoric is more appropriate to Tipper Gore’s goofy Parents Music Resource Center newsletter than to *Newsweek*... Surely, the moral outrage expressed in this piece would be better applied to contemporary American crises in healthcare, education, housing, joblessness, the environment, mass transit and day care” (Bernard 14).

contemporary youth culture as “tribal,” adding that “Attitude primarily is a working-class and underclass phenomenon, a response to the diminishing expectations of millions of American youths who forgot to go to business school in the 1980s” (Adler and Foote). Tricia Rose argues that media reports about rap music consistently quote only the most violent (anything by the Geto Boys), inflammatory (the aforementioned “Fuck tha Police” [1989] as well as Ice-T’s “Cop Killer” [1992]) and misogynist (2 Live Crew) of rap lyrics. The violence and anger in these lyrics is not analyzed or decoded, which, according to Rose, “is crucial to the fear that current crime reporting encourages and to the work of demonizing. Such people are violent for no apparent reason; they are not like us” (“Rap Music”).

Perhaps the most damning stain on rap music was Tipper Gore’s PMRC. Though the PMRC’s original target was rock and heavy metal music in the 1980s, its focus abruptly shifted to rap in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Pollack 20) once the latter began to increase its mainstream fan base. As part of her anti-rap crusade, Tipper Gore even published a now famous editorial entitled “Hate, Rape and Rap” in the *Washington Post* in 1990, which compared 2 Live Crew’s sexual lyrics with the rape of a Central Park jogger (Berry 175). This rape was widely reported to be inspired by the lyrics of Tone Loc’s highly sexual single “Wild Thing” (1989), since one of the accused sang the song just after he was arrested. The media labeled the men’s behavior as “wildin’,” a term then used in the black community to mean “goin’ out and having fun” or at its most deviant, “[stealing] some shit” (qtd. in George 19). Thus in this case Tipper Gore was acting as a “moral entrepreneur,” an individual who crusades against an element which disturbs their “absolute ethic” (Cohen 127), by linking up three disparate social threats: urban crime (the rape of the Central Park jogger), black male teenagers and rap music (despite the fact that Tone Loc’s “Wild Thing” was hardly considered “rap” to hardcore fans in the late 1980s) to

suit her own agenda of censoring what she believed to be morally offensive music. One anti-rap and anti-rock lobbying group, Missouri Project Rock, which was working in cooperation with the PMRC, even resorted to 1950s-era metaphors when denouncing rap in their direct mail campaigns “Rap music...is a hypnotic chant that is all rhythm with a demonic power...According to one ex-high Satanist, it is identical with the voodoo chants and rituals used within Satanism to summon up demons of lust and violence” (qtd. in Pollack 20).<sup>149</sup> The PMRC campaign was successful primarily because Gore was able to associate urban crime with urban music. This process, which Cohen describes as “widening of the net,” occurs when ambiguous stimuli (such as rap) are roped into the framework of other pressing but unrelated social problems (rape, the drug problem in inner cities), all of which are believed to be signs of a larger theme of a social meltdown (81-82). Cohen explains that “A characteristic of hysteria is that the ‘wrong’ stimulus is chosen as the object of attack or fear” and that “[t]hese targets are not, of course, chosen randomly, but from groups already structurally vulnerable to social control” (83).

### 3.3.1 Hip Hop Teenpics

Although print and news media played an active role in disseminating hip hop to a wider audience, Melvin Donalson, author of *Hip Hop in American Cinema* (2007), argues that “[m]ore than any other medium, Hollywood movies introduced mainstream America to hip-hop culture in the 1980s” (7). Much as studios discovered the money making potential of rock n’ roll films soon after rock n’ roll music hit big among middle class teenagers, the teenage buzz surrounding hip hop culture (including rap music, break dancing and graffiti art) convinced studios to exploit

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<sup>149</sup> *The Horrible Dr. Bones* (2000, Ted Nicolaou), a direct to DVD release, illustrates some of these fears about hip hop music. The title character, a demented radio and music producer, Dr. Bones (Darrow Igus), uses rap music as a vehicle for transmitting his “voodoo ritual chant” to unsuspecting listeners, thus turning them into his zombie slaves.

this new phenomenon. As with their 1950s predecessors, the majority of films in this hip hop-inspired cycle depicted good natured kids who just wanted to have fun, listen and breakdance to rap music and to stay away from their parents or other regulatory bodies. Entries in this hip hop cycle include: *Wild Style* (1983, Charlie Ahearn), *Breakin'* (1984, Joel Silberg), *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo* (1984, Sam Firstenberg), *Beat Street* (1984, Stan Lathan), *Body Rock* (1984, Marcelo Epstein), *Rappin'* (1985, Joel Silberg), *Turk 182!* (1985, Bob Clark), *Fast Forward* (1985, Sidney Poitier), *Krush Groove* (1985, Michael Schultz), and *Tougher than Leather* (1988, Rick Rubin). Almost all of the films in this cycle approach hip hop as *the* cultural form of the moment accessible to everyone, from the most seasoned inner city b-boy (i.e., breakdancer) to the most isolated suburbanite. In this cycle: "Hip hop is shown as a youth movement that could reconcile differences of any kind if only given the opportunity to do so" (Donalson 14). Indeed, these films take many of their cues from the musical genre, which aims to meld the dream world of the musical with the mundane real world via the joy of song and dance (Feuer 84).

For example, *Breakin'* reiterates the common backstage musical conflict of the classically trained dancer versus the self taught hooper, of high art versus low art. *Breakin'* tells the story of Kelly (Lucinda Dickey), a white dancer struggling to book jobs in Los Angeles, and her burgeoning friendship/apprenticeship with Ozone (Adolfo "Shabba-Doo" Quinones) and Turbo (Michael "Boogaloo Shrimp" Chambers), two break dancers from "the streets." After a frustrating dance class in which she is sexually harassed by her snob of a teacher, Franco (Ben Lokey), Kelly agrees to accompany her classmate to Venice Beach to witness some breakdancing. It is significant that Kelly's friend, a black male, must serve as her tour guide into this section of Los Angeles; otherwise she may have never encountered this "new" form of street dancing. The film clearly uses the character of Kelly, a wholesome, hardworking, yet down-to-

earth white woman, to appeal to white middle class audiences, who similarly might feel confused by the foreign world of breakdancing. Kelly, who has been looking for a way to inject a spark into her own dancing, is revitalized by this contact with the street performers. After witnessing a battle dance she exclaims “They were real. There was something that was *alive!*” In this scene the *mise en scène* is populated with onlookers and dancers dressed in bright, vibrant colored clothing. The sun is shining and everyone, black and white, dancer and nondancer, is smiling, clapping and moving to the beat. According to *Breakin’*, *everyone* loves hip hop and it revitalizes those who come into contact with it.

By centering the narrative on Kelly’s arduous, step by step training in the art of breakdancing and poplocking, the film, like *Rock Around the Clock*, is a useful vehicle for the commodification and dissemination of hip hop culture. For example, the film opens with a detailed visual sequence of a break dancer getting dressed. We see a close up of a hand putting on fingerless leather gloves and several spiked bracelets, a chain belt being snapped onto a waist, an earring dangling on an ear, a hand caressing a black felt hat, etc. Once outfitted in the iconic clothing of a breakdancer, the dancer—Ozone—looks directly at the camera and smiles, before beginning his performance. This and other “how to” sequences illustrate how the film addresses both those within the subculture and those looking to learn more about it. Furthermore, the narrative concludes with Kelly, Ozone and Turbo successfully convincing a snobby group of judges (one of whom is, of course, British) to give them their own dance show. The final scene of the film is the show itself, “Street Jazz,” which involves recreating the “streets”—signified by illuminated graffiti, a lamppost, and a fog machine—on a Broadway stage. The boys’ “street” style is likewise cleaned up—Turbo and Ozone wear red satin costumes instead of jeans and T-shirts while Kelly wears a sequined leotard. The song to which this final performance is

choreographed—"Street People" (1984)—assures the audience that hip hop is nothing to be afraid of. In fact, it is impossible to resist: "I know you feel the hypnotizin' beat/ of dancing in the street. We come in every color and we share common ground./ Whenever there's a jam, you'll always find us getting down." The address here is inclusive—hip hop is for everyone. *Breakin'* was successful<sup>150</sup> enough to generate a sequel, *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo*, which, like the original, aimed to make break dancing palatable to a broad audience by erasing its class and race-based origins. By the mid-1980s, break dancing ceased to be a subcultural behavior limited to a select group of inner city practitioners. Break dancing and break dancers appeared in commercials, at the 1984 summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles and even at President Reagan's second inauguration ceremony (Donalson 15).

Of course, break dancing, as a fad, lost much of its mainstream appeal by the late 1980s, while the popularity of rap music continued to ascend. *Krush Groove*, one of the most successful examples of this early hip hop cycle, approaches the phenomenon of rap in much the same way that *Rock Around the Clock* addressed rock n' roll. First, the film features a series of big name contemporary rap acts acting as artists who, like Bill Haley and the Comets, are trying to make it in a world still somewhat hostile to their new brand of music. By portraying professional rap stars, including Run DMC, Kurtis Blow, the Fat Boys, LL Cool J, and the Beastie Boys, as amateurs, the film, in the tradition of the classic Hollywood musical, creates the feeling of a more intimate connection between artist and fan. As Jane Feuer has argued of the film musical "By eliminating professionalism within the films, the more exploitative aspects of professionalism appear to be eliminated between the film and its spectator" (14). Given that rap music is so concerned with authenticity, this portrayal of professionals as amateurs, which brings

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<sup>150</sup> The film was budgeted at \$2 million and grossed over \$30 million (Donalson12).

the rap stars closer to their fans, was a clever choice by *Krush Groove*'s producers. Fans were treated to filmed performances of their favorite artists (which were the main source of the film's box office appeal) without having to question whether these artists were somehow exploiting their fans or becoming too "mainstream." And like *Rock Around the Clock*, *Krush Groove* also depicts the mainstream, adult world as either confused by or hostile towards rap music. For example, Russell's (Blair Underwood) father, a middle aged preacher (Daniel Simmons), refuses to loan him money for his record label, Krush Groove, because rap, according to him, is "noise," not music. Of course, the majority of these disapproving authority figures in the film are white and of varying social backgrounds: a middle aged science teacher (Elaine Shaprio) who kicks the Fat Boys out of class for beat-boxing, the car wash owner (Karl Schroder) who fires his entire staff for listening to rap music as they wash cars, and the loan officer (Michael Kaufman) who denies Krush Groove a loan based on their shoddy bookkeeping skills as well as their choice to promote rap music (a genre he has never heard of). Throughout the film it is the (primarily white) adult community that does not understand the tastes and desires of today's youth.

*Krush Groove*, like *Breakin'*, employs a doubled address to its target youth audience. On the one hand, both films definitively appeal to the already existing hip hop subculture through their promotion of the "us versus them" dichotomy. *Breakin'*, for example, contains a scene in which Kelly, Ozone and Turbo attend a cocktail party in order to woo some wealthy patrons for their stage show, "Street Jazz." Almost every guest at the party is white, upper middle class, and middle-aged—the demographic least likely to be aware of or to understand the hip hop subculture—and attired in suits or dresses. Classical music plays quietly in the background. Kelly dresses somewhat appropriately for the party (she has on a dress paired with a loud, oversized red blazer), but Ozone and Turbo, as representatives of the iconoclastic

street culture, don their T-shirts, jeans, fingerless gloves and Converse sneakers. The party guests openly gape at the two boys when they arrive at the party, and nudge each other as they pass by. When Turbo approaches the hors d'oeuvres table, two middle-aged women approach him, like an exotic zoo animal. "Are you an entertainer?" one woman asks, and her friend explains "He's one of those young men who spins around on his head!" They both throw their heads back and laugh. Here, these adults appear silly, out of touch and slightly rude.

While both films create an adult, primarily white, middle class antagonist, the mainstream Other necessary for defining the contours of the subculture, they must also, as products of mainstream culture, make the hip hop subculture accessible to a broad audience. For example, *Krush Groove* depicts youth culture as a force united by their love of hip hop when the Fat Boys stage an impromptu rap performance in their high school's stairwell. As the scene begins they pull out a large boom box and place it at the top of steps. We then see the Fat Boys from a high angle shot which slowly zooms in closer to the boys who stand with their arms outstretched, as if they are gathering strength for their performance. "Its almost time!" one boy exclaims, as camera cuts to a close up of the school clock. Seconds later the bell rings and teenagers begin to stream out into the hallways. They immediately hear the music and begin to dance down the hallway towards the stairwell, like lemmings marching towards a cliff. Because the Fat Boys are standing at the top of the stairwell, it appears as if they are on stage, with their enthusiastic audience on the floor below them. Their performance, "Don't You Love Me," directed towards one of the boy's crushes, captivates the entire student body, black, white and Latino. The teenagers clap, breakdance and cheer throughout the song. Hip hop is not the music of a small "in the know" subculture, this scene indicates, it is *the* culture of today's youth. This

particular cycle of hip hop films from the mid- to late 1980s is therefore predicated on both an exclusive and inclusive mode of address.

### 3.3.2 The Ghetto Action Cycle

If films like *Breakin'* and *Krush Groove* can be considered the offspring of mainstream America's early, somewhat utopian romance with the burgeoning hip hop culture, then the ghetto action cycle is product of the mainstream's more conflicted, dystopian fascination with one particular manifestation of hip hop culture—gangsta rap. While the aforementioned 1980s era films about the hip hop subculture initially depict it as a collection of foreign, somewhat threatening behaviors, these films, like rock n' roll teenpics, nevertheless conclude by showing the audience that contemporary youth's music of choice—hip hop—is safe for *everyone* to enjoy. By contrast, the ghetto action cycle illuminates how the hip hop subculture, reduced to gangsta rap's hyperbolic imagery of violence and male posturing, is dangerous and threatening. These films are thus the clear descendents of JD teenpics and their spectacularization of deviant activities including stealing, drug dealing, weapons dealing, car jacking and even murder. *Menace II Society*, *Fresh* (1994, Boaz Yakin) and *Clockers* (1995, Spike Lee) all detail the world of teenage (and preteen) drug dealers; *New Jersey Drive* is about joyriding carjackers; *Strapped* (1993, Forest Whitaker) is about teenage pregnancy and gun dealers; *South Central*, *Tales from the Hood* (1995, Rusty Cundieff), and *Original Gangstas* (1996, Larry Cohen) are about the perils of gang life; and films like *Boyz N the Hood*, *South Central*, *Menace II Society* (1993, Allen and Albert Hughes) and *Juice*, all attempt to portray the previously hidden social worlds of working and lower middle class black youth. In fact, the press kit for *Boyz N the Hood* claims that “the film aims to give the first true picture of what life is like in the ‘LA Hood’,” while the

press kit for *South Central* explains that the film “examines the culture that spawns today’s gangsters and their ever-younger aspirants, and the devastation this harsh environment causes to today’s families.”

Youth culture, particularly as it is depicted in *Boyz N the Hood*, *South Central*, *Juice* and *Menace II Society*, is portrayed as self contained, suspicious of authority figures and cynical. The teenagers’ troubled relationship with authority figures—always a running theme in the teenpic—is highlighted in *Menace II Society* in a brief scene depicting a group of black teens engaging in a range of deviant and illegal behaviors: one boy smokes crack, others drink 40-ounce bottles of malt liquor and a few flash guns. Rap music booms in the background and the boys seem unconcerned about engaging in these behaviors in a public space. The camera tracks around the group, eventually coming to rest on one of the young men who suddenly looks panicked and announces that everyone must run. We have not heard or seen what the boys are fleeing from, but since this sequence is filmed in slow motion, the boys’ frantic movements appear exaggerated and useless, the way running feels in a nightmare. As the boys disappear from the frame we see what they have been running from: a police car. This shot is filmed with a wide angle lens, so that the grill and hood of the car fills up the entire screen. Like the boys, the car moves slowly and ponderously, and even hits a telephone pole as it attempts to maneuver through the narrow alley where the boys were previously hanging out. Here, the film style mimics that of the horror film in order to show how the unexpected arrival of the police car strikes instant, involuntary terror into the boys. The police car resembles a monster with a large, metal mouth (and it is difficult to make out the faces of the officers inside). Furthermore, by filming the boys in medium shots which cut off their heads, the film emphasizes the policing of young, black male bodies.

Despite this frequent emphasis on racial tensions in the inner city, the teens inhabiting the films of the ghetto action cycle are not so different from the delinquents who populate JD teenpics like *High School Confidential!* and *Teenage Doll*; they have their own language and clothing styles, their own rules for how to live, and no matter how seemingly innocuous the situation, the potential for danger, violence or death is never too far away. For example, the opening sequence of *Boyz N the Hood*, which is set in the 1980s during the protagonists' childhoods, echoes a similar moment in the coming of age tale, *Stand By Me* (1986, Rob Reiner). We see four young children walking home from school, framed in a long shot, discussing a shooting from the night before. When one child asks "Ya'll wanna see something?" the group follows him along a street marked "One Way" towards an alley marked with signs reading "Do Not Enter" and "Wrong Way." These street signs, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, are part of the iconography of the ghetto, and normally represent the constraints on movement and behavior of its residents. However, in this case the signs comment upon the children's choices: a childhood exposed to violence sets children along an almost predetermined path to ruin, a "one way street," and "Do Not Enter" is a warning for the children to turn around, to avert their eyes from the spectacle that awaits them in a back alley. What the children are going to see, it turns out, is a dead body, a victim of gang violence.

While in *Stand by Me* seeing a dead body is a climactic, disturbing moment, forming the basis of the film's quest narrative, in *Boyz N the Hood*, this scene is essentially a throw away moment, part of the kids' everyday existence. Furthermore, a later scene in this flashback segment of *Boyz N the Hood* echoes the aforementioned "corrective history" lesson found in *High School Confidential!* A young Tre (Desi Arnez Heinz II) disrupts his teacher's lecture about Thanksgiving (he calls Pilgrims "Penguins"), causing the class to erupt in laughter.

When the teacher sarcastically asks if Tre would like to teach the class in her place, he confidently responds “Yeah, I can do that.” With pointer in hand and a map of the world, Tre explains to his classmates that all the world’s people originated from Africa, “That means everybody’s really from Africa. Everybody.” One boy retorts, “I ain’t from Africa, I’m from Crenshaw Mafia!” Here are the both the origins of the 1990s gangsta ethos (the defiance of authority, the reference to neighborhood gangs) as well as the depiction of inner city childhoods (a pan at the beginning of the scene reveals crayon-drawn pictures of surveillance helicopters, police cars and coffins hanging on the walls), something which had yet to appear on the big screen. In other words, like the JD teenpic, the ghetto action cycle makes visible a youth culture that was previously invisible.<sup>151</sup> And like the JD teenpic, these films were created to capitalize on a previously marginalized audience—black youth (Guerrero 165).<sup>152</sup>

Ghetto action films depict the gangsta ethos as enticing and terrifying, as something to emulate and something to eliminate. The gangsta’s machismo, like the JD’s postwar anomie, is initially portrayed as an alluring spectacle that is almost always condemned by the film’s conclusion. And like JD teenpics, the high stakes of the deviant lifestyle are established almost immediately within these films. For example, *South Central* opens with Bobby (Glen Plummer) being released from a lengthy jail sentence. We soon find out that his girlfriend gave birth to his son while he was still locked up. While Bobby initially professes little interest in the prospect of being a father—he tells his friend that the boy is “just another little Deuce [i.e., gang member]”—it does not take long for him to become smitten with his son.

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151 In a 1991 *Ebony* feature “Angry, assertive and aware—young black filmmakers,” Singleton compares *Boyz N the Hood* to coming of age stories about white characters, like *American Graffiti* and *Rebel without a Cause*. He calls *Boyz N the Hood* “the first realistic portrait of what it’s like to be young, Black and American in the ‘90s.”

<sup>152</sup> See Chapter 4 for a more detailed explanation of why studios began making films for black audiences in the 1990s.

Seconds after Carole (LaRita Shelby) places the boy in his arms, Bobby is entranced, telling the boy “I’m your Daddy” (though earlier he claimed to be unsure of the boy’s paternity). Later that evening, Bobby is awake, holding his son in the dark. When Carole wakes up to join them, he places an arm around both of them and explains “Everything will be all right. I’m home now.” The low lighting, reminiscent of a Rembrandt painting and the slowly tracking movement of the camera around the happy family, allows us to take in this brief moment of quiet, domestic bliss. Of course, this idyllic scene is intended to highlight what Bobby stands to lose by remaining in his gang, the Deuces. Any moment of true happiness in the ghetto action film—Caine’s plans to move to Atlanta with Ronnie and his surrogate son, Anthony, in *Menace II Society*, Ricky’s plans to attend the University of Southern California on a football scholarship in *Boyz N the Hood*, the pre-heist friendship of the four teens in *Juice*—exist in order to be snatched away, illuminating the dire consequences of life in the ‘hood.

As in the JD teenpic, ghetto action films effectively translate the fundamental generational split into filmic language. For example, like *Blackboard Jungle*, *Boyz N the Hood* illustrates the state of adolescent/adult relationships via their respective choices in music. In an early childhood scene from *Boyz N the Hood*, Furious (Lawrence Fishburne) and his son, Tre are driving back to their home in South Central L.A. after a father-son fishing trip. When the Five Stairsteps’ hit “Oooh Child” (1970) comes on the radio, Furious turns it up and sings along with a blissful look on his face (though Tre does not appear to “get” why this song makes his father so ecstatic). As they pull up into their driveway, Tre is witness to the very public arrest of 10-year-old Dougbboy (Baha Jackson), his neighbor and best friend, who was caught stealing. The song, no longer emanating from the car (it is parked and off), becomes the non-diegetic accompaniment to this staging of lost innocence. As the Five Stairsteps croon “Oooh child,

things are gonna get easier” Tre exits his father’s car and approaches the foreground of the shot, as the camera pulls in for a close up of his defeated face. Tre and Doughboy then lock eyes in a shot/reverse shot exchange. When the lyric “Someday, we’ll put it together and we’ll get it all done,/ Some day, when you’re head is much lighter” plays, Tre’s father approaches him from background of the shot and rubs his shoulders. This shot of parental support and concern is contrasted with the next shot, of the police car disappearing over the horizon. Here are the diverging paths of two boys: one, who with his father’s support, will ultimately grow up to make the “right” decisions while the other, lacking such strong patriarchal support, will pursue the life of a deviant.

These sealed fates are emphasized by the next shot, a black screen which informs us that it is now seven years later, in the present day (1991). The soothing sounds of the Five Stairsteps transitions to that of a police siren which again transitions to loud, bass-heavy rap music. The scene is a lively backyard cookout. We quickly learn that much has changed in the last seven years—the cookout is celebrating (the now adult) Doughboy’s (Ice Cube) release from prison and Ricky, his half brother, is a teenage father. Likewise, the party is a spectacle of the contemporary teenage subculture: partygoers are decked out in early 1990s urban fashion (biker shorts, overalls, baggy pants, baseball caps, and big gold jewelry) as they dance, drink malt liquor, play dominoes, plot how they might have sex and use contemporary slang. Here *Boyz N the Hood* equates the soul music of the 1960s and 1970s with an irretrievable past, the baby boomer generation, and the unrealized hopes of the Civil Rights movement,<sup>153</sup> while rap music is associated with the loss of childhood innocence (marked by Doughboy’s arrest and Ricky’s

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<sup>153</sup> Venise Berry writes that soul music of the 1960s and 1970s “...created for black American culture a sense of heightened black consciousness, unity and pride. Soul music, ultimately, served as a powerful catalyst for protest and social change during the civil rights and black power movements” (168).

untimely entry into fatherhood) and political innocence, as well as the contemporary, urban youth subculture.

Much as Jim and his father are incapable of understanding each other's respective cultural worlds in *Rebel without a Cause*, we are meant to view Caine (Tyrin Turner) and his primary caregiver, his grandfather (Arnold Johnson), in the same manner in *Menace II Society*. According to the logic of the film, Caine's grandparents are products of the 1960s ideology of assimilation, or what Todd Boyd has described as the "ideology of the race man." This generation, which is modeled on the non-violent, Civil Rights Movement approach to race relations and the teachings of Martin Luther King, Jr., "locates its politics in the power of cultural advancement or what was once thought to be 'uplifting the race'" (*Am I Black Enough* 17). However, as Boyd points out, being a "good role model" often (though not always) meant conforming to white, middle class standards of behavior and emphasized the primacy of individual effort over that of the group. This belief system was based on celebrating and making visible the achievements of black Americans. But by celebrating these individual achievements, a necessary examination of the structures of racism in American society fell to the wayside. As I mentioned, this ideology was promoted during the Reagan administration, during which images of black success were used as a smokescreen to distract the public from the actual socioeconomic problems affecting the black community. Boyd claims that this political era effectively disappears in 1992,<sup>154</sup> coinciding with the L.A. riots and the airing of the last episode of the *Cosby* show.

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<sup>154</sup> The "second era" identified by Boyd is the "New Black Aesthetic," which overlaps with the tail end of the first era and the beginnings of the third era. This ethos is tied to the nationalist politics of Malcolm X and is marked by a large output of cultural products emanating from the black community (i.e., the films of Spike Lee).

By contrast, Caine is part of what Boyd calls the “3<sup>rd</sup> era,” the origins of which are marked by the release of N.W.A.’s 1989 album *Straight Outta Compton*, and by a rejection of political leaders and politics in general. This generation, unlike the generation of the “race man,” defines itself more by class, region or specific neighborhoods, than by race. Rather than seeking social acceptance, the gangsta, like the 1950s JD, functions to openly defy social norms and expectations. Cornel West identifies this worldview as “nihilism”:

Nihilism is to be understood here not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds, legitimate standards or authority; it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness. The frightening result is a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world. (22-23)

Given this perceived gap (between the belief that political, economic, and social equality are achievable and the belief that all is lost), it is not surprising that Caine rejects his grandfather’s religious devotion, Puritan work ethic and mainstream cultural tastes. The division between these two generations is best exemplified by a scene in which Caine watches the conclusion to *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946, Frank Capra) with his grandparents. Just as little Zuzu Bailey (Karolyn Grimes), with her blond ringlets and sweet dimples, exclaims “Teacher says every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings!” the camera cuts to a medium shot of Caine and his grandmother. While Caine’s grandmother (Marilyn Coleman) faces the television set with a contented smile, Caine wears an expression of complete disbelief. He clearly does not “buy into” *It’s a Wonderful Life* and its impossibly resolved Hollywood ending; George Bailey (James Stewart) teeters on the brink of economic, social and mental disaster, only to be rescued via heavenly intervention and the goodwill of his community. Caine is aware that such idealistic resolutions do not address

the problems he is currently facing and is dumbfounded that this conclusion satisfies his grandparents (much as they adhere to the Bible and Caine rejects it).<sup>155</sup> Caine later echoes the nihilistic malaise of Jim Stark when his grandfather asks him “Don’t you care if you live or die?” and Caine responds, after some thought, “I don’t know.”

In addition to illustrating this profound generational gap, ghetto action films highlight the deviance and difference of contemporary youth by making a spectacle of their illegal activities. Unlike the JDs of 1950s teenpics, who appear to engage in delinquent behavior primarily because there is nothing better to do, the protagonists of ghetto action films are chiefly motivated by financial gain. As a result, one of the primary forms of deviance depicted in ghetto action films like *Boyz N the Hood*, *Menace II Society*, *Fresh* and *Friday*, is the drug trade: buying, selling, preparing and transporting drugs. *Menace II Society* contains a lengthy scene, shot in the style of a music video, in which Caine prepares drugs for sale. As the N.W.A. single “Dopeman” (1989) blares, we see an extreme close up of a metal faucet. In the next shot we see water from the faucet swirling, in slow motion, at the bottom of a metal pot, which then cuts to a shot of a gas stove lighting up and crack cocaine cooking in a makeshift double boiler. Much as 1950s teenpics illustrated the latest dance steps or, more nefariously, how to make a zip gun (see *Dino*), this scene is a visual instruction manual on how to prepare drugs for sale. These images then cut to a medium close up of Caine, lit from behind with hazy spotlights, cutting up the now hardened crack, looking determined and in control. Being a drug dealer, this scene implies, is pretty cool. Caine’s voice over then explains “Working for minimum wage was never my style. I like big dollars.” As if to emphasize this point, the image of Caine cutting up cubes of crack cocaine cuts to a close up of shiny, spinning gold rims. In other words, selling crack translates

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<sup>155</sup> In his review of *Menace II Society* for *The Washington Post*, Stanley Crouch discusses this scene as well “The characters and the plot are as unintelligible to this young man as they are obvious to his elders” (G1).

directly into expensive consumer goods. The camera then tracks around the car to reveal Caine in the passenger seat of his stolen convertible. As he cruises around town, still in slow motion, we see the neighborhood through Caine's eyes and partake in his pleasure. By filming the scene in this way, the act of making drugs and profiting from them is alluring and glamorous.

Of course, the gangsta was most threatening as a media image when he appeared en masse as a gang. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, the images of the urban gang, particularly those located in South Central Los Angeles (and typified, in the public imagination, by the very public antagonism between gangs known as the Bloods and the Crips), circulated throughout the news media<sup>156</sup> and gangsta rap lyrics. The first mainstream film to address this new fear was the 1988 release *Colors* (Dennis Hopper).<sup>157</sup> Todd Boyd writes that the film “made the gang banger America’s contemporary criminal of choice,” linking “crime with specific notions of race” (87). While *Colors* represents an attempt to warn society at large about the dangers of gangs while assuring the audience that the LAPD was taking charge of the situation (much as films like *G-Men* [1935, William Keighley] assured the public that the FBI was in control of organized crime in the 1930s), *South Central*, released in 1992, depicts the gang subculture from the point of view of the gang. In the first half of *South Central*, gang life, represented by the Deuces, is posited as a potential solution to disenfranchisement in the ghetto. Ray Ray (Byron Minns), the leader of the Deuces, explains that the gang is necessary in order to keep the “smack man” and other predators out of their ‘hood. The gang also serves as a source of pride to its members, connecting them both to their immediate community as well as serving as a

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<sup>156</sup> In the late 1980s, national newspapers begin to report on increasing incidents of gang-related crimes in the Los Angeles area. See “Police Deployed to Curb Gangs in Los Angeles” (Reinhold 9) in *The New York Times*; “Armed, Sophisticated and Violent, Two Drug Gangs Blanket Nation” (Robbins A1) in *The New York Times*.

<sup>157</sup> When *Colors* was released, many feared that it would incite further gang violence (Reinhold). One young man was shot killed while waiting online for tickets to *Colors* in Los Angeles (“Youth Killed on Line to See Movie on Gangs” A14).

link with the past (both Ray Ray and the protagonist, Bobby, have fathers who were in the same gang in the early 1970s). As in the JD teenpic, this subculture is defined by a self-contained group (consisting of gang members and their families) that lives, works and socializes together. Though *South Central* concludes with a denunciation of gang life, claiming it is antithetical to, rather than the definition of, “family,” the first part of the film details why engaging in this delinquent behavior might be attractive to an urban youth. In addition to positioning the Deuces as a makeshift family for these youths, giving them a sense of communion with previous generations, we also see the gang partying together and joyriding around town. In one scene, after Bobby commits his first murder (to rid the neighborhood of a predatory crack dealer), the gang marks the occasion by giving him a heart-shaped tattoo under his eye, a visual proclamation that he has committed murder in service of the gang. This scene is solemn: Bobby lies down in the grass as members of his gang circle around him. The next shot is a close up of Bobby’s face as Ray Ray prepares a needle, explaining: “You’re a G [gangster] now, man. Now you got your heart. This is what Deuce is all about...” By committing the murder Bobby not only permanently marks himself as a part of his gang, he also seals his fate. In the very next scene he returns home to Carole and Jimmy; the moment she sees Bobby’s tattoo, her face crumples. Carole understands that their happy existence—depicted in the previous bedroom scene—is now over.

Another deviant behavior depicted in the ghetto action cycle is carjacking, a crime which received increased media attention throughout the 1990s and was associated almost exclusively with the inner city and black youth. Much as teenagers fetishized hot rods and drag racing in the 1950s, teenagers within the 1990s hip hop culture developed a similar car obsession, whether the wheels were stolen or obtained legitimately. In films like *Boyz N the Hood*, *Menace II Society*, *South Central* and *Paid in Full* (2002, Charles Stone III), cruising, for

the sake of showing off one's car and checking out the cars of others, forms an integral part of the youth culture. Perhaps this new emphasis on the spectacle of cars (particularly cars that have been outfitted with rims, hydraulics and fancy grilles) explains why carjacking became more prevalent (particularly in the Northeast United States) in the 1990s. Carjackings and carjackers make an appearance in films like *Menace II Society*, *Jacked* (2001, Timothy Wayne Folsome), *Gang Tapes* (2001, Adam Ripp), *Jack Movez* (2003, Ed and Jose Quiroz) and non-juvenile oriented ghetto action films like *New Jack City*, *Jason's Lyric* (1994, Dough McHenry) and *Set it Off*. However, the behavior is only given primary narrative attention in one ghetto action film, *New Jersey Drive* (1995, Nick Gomez). *New Jersey Drive* capitalized on Newark, New Jersey's then dubious distinction of being the carjacking capital of the country; in the early 1990s it was estimated that 40 cars were stolen every 24 hours in the city of Newark (Marriott A1). Newark's problem with auto theft was first given a national spotlight in 1992 when Michel Marriott wrote a series of articles about the subject for the *New York Times*. The language of the article often mimics the campy, metaphor-heavy taglines found on the best JD teenpic movie posters—in one article he writes that “Their bodies are slight but their feet are lead.”<sup>158</sup> In the same article he quotes a security guard who opines, like a character straight out of a 1950s hot rod film, “These kids think they're immortal. They don't know. No one is immortal” (B5).

The teenagers in *New Jersey Drive* do not steal cars to make money so much as they steal them in order to perform dangerous stunts; these stunts generate a rush and help teens

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<sup>158</sup> Compare Marriott's metaphor-heavy writing with these taglines from hotrod films: “Crazy kids...living to a wild rock n' roll beat!” (*Hot Rod Gang* [1958, Lew Landers) and “Murder...at 120 miles per hour!” (*Dragstrip Riot* [1958, David Bradley]), etc.

to maintain a reputation with their peers.<sup>159</sup> *New Jersey Drive* frequently makes a spectacle of these stunts; we see characters careening in circles (called “donuts”) or driving the car on two wheels, before throngs of teenager onlookers who hang around the urban landscape with nothing better to do than watch other people drive.<sup>160</sup> We are also invited to empathize with the film’s protagonist, Jason (Sharron Corley), who provides the film’s voice over. At the film’s conclusion, when Jason has served time in juvenile detention and witnessed the shooting deaths of several friends, he rationalizes his carjacking obsession to the audience, “We were just trying to make our mark in the world. To find something we could call our own,” a statement which echoes that made by a teenager interviewed by Marriott. This teen explains that he steals because “We wanted our own thing” (B5). Though these deviant actions are eventually recuperated back into the fold of dominant society at the film’s conclusion, the characters are often depicted as rebels against a (caricatured) brutal and racist white police force that constantly patrols their neighborhood, looking for kids to beat and arrest. Unlike the disapproving squares in 1950s teenpics, the adults in *New Jersey Drive* pose a deadly threat to the film’s youth and so the teenagers’ behavior, at least up until the film’s conclusion, is seen as justified in some way.

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<sup>159</sup> Marriott reports that in Newark almost 78% of stolen cars are eventually recovered, indicating that Newark teens were stealing cars as a rite of passage, or to gain respect in the neighborhood (B5), a fact reflected in the film’s narrative.

<sup>160</sup> The allure of this teen activity is best illustrated by success of the *Grand Theft Auto* video game series, including editions like *Liberty City* (2005), *Vice City* (2002), *London 1969* (1999) and *San Andreas* (2004). Like the characters in a ghetto action film, *GTA: San Andreas* allows players to steal cars at gunpoint (hence the title), kill police officers, beat prostitutes, commit drive-by shootings and run over other character who get in their way. The game is also set in South Central LA, like a ghetto action film, its characters don early 90s gangsta gear, like bandanas and oversized button down shirts, and speak in early 1990s gangsta slang.

### 3.4 PULLING THE MARGINS INTO THE CENTER: THE JD TEENPIC

Film cycles are a useful medium for the transmission of youth subcultures precisely because of their ability to create a spectacular display. Every film in the teenpic cycle provided an opportunity for the studio's costume department to outfit their actors in up to the minute fashions, which, like the cycle's depiction of deviant behaviors or the latest dance steps, forms a major part of the teenpic's appeal. Dick Hebdige argues that subcultural styles are "maps of meaning": "As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the 'silent majority,' which challenges the principles of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus" (18). By donning, for instance, a pair of blue jeans with a black leather jacket<sup>161</sup> or dancing to rock n' roll music, teenagers both mark their inclusion within a specific group while simultaneously communicating their reaction against or separation from, dominant society (even if the person wearing this clothing is not fully aware of the implications of his/her style). However, in addition to providing viewers with a visual and aural display of teenage subcultural styles and behaviors, including motorcycle gang riots, attempted rapes, assaults and deadly chickee runs, the films in the JD teenpic cycle had to eventually recuperate these images of rebellion and social difference in order to fulfill the contract brokered with the viewer (and society at large) in the beginning of the film via the square up. The square up promises the viewer that the filmmakers would never create such amoral filth for the sake of mere titillation. Therefore the teenpic must conclude with some "solution" to the problem at hand in order to make good on the square up's promise.

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<sup>161</sup> In a March 1961 issue of *Teens Today*, a girl wrote in to complain that her parents do not like her new boyfriend since he dresses like a juvenile delinquent "I've been dating a wonderful boy named Jerry, but if you saw him on the street, I guess you'd think he was a hood. He wears sideburns, a black leather jacket and he rarely says more than two words to most people..." (5).

The teenpic's solution, a recuperative conclusion, usually plays out in one of three different ways: 1) the delinquent commits an act of redemption or reformation (Jim Stark in *Rebel*, Dino in *Dino*, Johnny Melody in *Go, Johnny, Go!* 2) his/her delinquent behavior is shown to be innocent and harmless after all (the rock n' roll lovers in *Rock Around the Clock* and *Rock, Pretty Baby* [1956, Richard Bartlett]) or 3) the delinquent proves to be unrecuperable and is therefore eliminated by death, incarceration or rejection by the larger teen community (i.e., Artie West [Vic Morrow] in *Blackboard Jungle*, Tony Rivers in *I was a Teenage Werewolf*, Matt Stevens [John Ashley] in *High School Caesar* [1960, O. Dale Ireland]). In addition to fulfilling the promise of the square up, this strategy proved useful for film studios because they were able to capitalize on images of teenage deviance without provoking the ire of the still in-tact Production Code Administration, moral watchdog groups or irate parents (not unlike the strategies of containment found in the conclusions of "classic" gangster films of the early 1930s). This containment, correction, reincorporation and/or punishment of deviant teen behavior is almost always demonstrated via a visual tableaux. For example, the last shot of *High School Confidential* shows Tony (Russ Tamblyn), Joan (Diane Jergens) and their square teacher, Mrs. Williams, all sitting together in the front seat of Tony's car. This image is comforting because Joan, the drug-addicted juvenile delinquent, has finally been integrated back into the fold of adult conformity. Likewise, throughout *Teen-Age Strangler* (1968, Ben Parker) Curly, the leader of the local hot rod gang, the Fastbacks, is resolutely anti-authoritarian. He refuses to cooperate with Lt. Anderson (Bill Bloom), who is trying to solve the case of the "teenage strangler," and gets himself permanently banned from Marty's diner, the local teen hang out. However, after some finger pointing, a fiery hot rod crash, and the arrest of the killer (it was the janitor), the rebellious juvenile delinquent, newly repentant and bandaged from his accident, is completely reconciled

with the adult community. In the final scene Curly, who is now allowed to return to Marty's, is given a soda "on the house" and Lt. Anderson sits with his arm around his shoulders. In the JD teenpic it literally pays to conform.

1950s teenpics often conclude with formerly rebellious teenagers accepting the rule of their parents, and by extension, mainstream social norms. In *Rebel without a Cause*, for example, Jim Stark spends most of the film raging against the hypocrisy and disingenuousness of the adult world and the impotence of his father. He rejects his parents' middle class conformity for the excitement of an alternative community created through like-minded alienated youth, like Plato (Sal Mineo) and Judy. Yet despite the fact that the film continually emphasizes Jim's inability to communicate with his parents and the adult world in general, it concludes with a narrative and visual reconciliation between father and son. As Jim mourns over the body of his friend, Plato, who was accidentally shot by the police after an evening of delinquent antics, he looks much like he did in the opening shots of the film when he was drunk and lying on the street, playing with a child's wind-up toy. But this time, rather than rejecting adult authority, Jim embraces it, literally. In a medium close up, we see Jim hugging his father's legs, much as a child would. His father (Jim Backus) then kneels down to lift his son into a standing position, assuring Jim "You can depend on me" and "Stand up and I'll stand up with you." Whereas Jim had earlier criticized his father for allowing himself to be emasculated by his overbearing mother, this scene restores patriarchal power to the father of the middle class family. Indeed, as the men embrace the camera cuts to a close up of Jim's mother (Ann Doran), who looks alienated and annoyed by this scene of male bonding and power. Jim then solidifies his transition into "responsible" adulthood and away from his juvenile, countercultural antics, when he zips up the red jacket he had loaned to Plato moments before he was shot. Here, Jim abandons his

youthful rebellion, signified by his loud, iconic jacket, and accepts the more adult sports jacket of his father. In one of the film's final shots Jim stands with his arm around Judy, accepting his role as the male half of a heterosexual couple.

*Teenage Doll* concludes in a similar fashion. At the film's climax Barbara, the middle class square who accidentally murdered a juvenile delinquent, finds herself trapped in a warehouse with only three options: give herself up to the police and possibly end up on death row for the murder of one of the Widows, flee to Arizona and start a new life alone, or face the wrath of the vengeful Widows. When she complains that none of these choices are acceptable, Eddie, a career juvenile delinquent and Barbara's former lover, tells her "Look kid, you're lucky. You still *got* a choice." Barbara ultimately decides to turn herself in to the police and we see her slowly approach the police detective and two other uniformed cops. When she reaches them she collapses in the arms of the detective as if relieved to be returning to a world of adult rules after an evening immersed in a teen-generated judicial system. When Betty, a Widow who also happens to be the daughter of a police officer, sees this emotional exchange from afar, she too realizes that she must abandon the gang and go straight, explaining "I've gotta take this gun back to my father." Betty stole her father's weapon, a symbol of his power over the nuclear family and society, in order to sell it for cash. But now Betty agrees to repent and restore that power to its "rightful" owner. Squirrel (Ziva Rodann), who likewise was depicted as having a stable family (though they are poor immigrants), follows behind Betty. As in the conclusion to *Teenage Strangler*, this compromise with adult society is marked visually—the final shot of the film is an aerial view of the alley—with adults and juvenile delinquents grouped together in a final reconciliation. What is particularly interesting about this film is while it successfully recuperates the deviance of girls like Barbara, Betty and Squirrel, who are raised in stable, two parent homes,

the other JDs, who lack such domestic support, are positioned as being “beyond help.” As Helen (Fay Spain) tells Betty, in a last ditch effort to get her to stay with Widows, “Its too late. For you, for me, for all of us.” The implication here is that the only teens worth saving are those from the middle or upwardly mobile working class. The rest are street trash, worthy of what will assuredly be a violent, untimely death, such as the one which opens the film. As a reflection of the times, *Teenage Doll* implies that JDs are a major social problem in the 1950s primarily because deviance had spread from the confines of the inner city to the suburbs.

As Helen indicates at the conclusion of *Teenage Doll*, occasionally the juvenile delinquent cannot be recuperated. He or she rejects the ministrations of big-hearted social workers and idealistic English teachers, opting instead to live by his own code or worse, to inflict his nihilistic code on others. If patience, therapy and adult empathy are ineffective, brute force—used for the elimination of the juvenile delinquent—is the only other option. For instance, at the conclusion of *Blackboard Jungle*, when Artie West refuses to turn in a paper, Mr. Dadier (Glenn Ford) tells him to go to the principal’s office. Rather than comply with this order, Artie stands his ground and demands that Dadier engage in a physical battle with him “You’re gonna have to *take* me to the principal’s office.” As the stand off escalates, we see a series of medium close ups of the rest of the boys in the classroom, who intently watch to see how this conflict will unfold. The boys are determining whom they will follow: Dadier, representing adult rules and conformity, or Artie, representing danger and juvenile rebellion. With such high stakes Dadier is left with no choice but to physically wrangle with Artie. After Artie has been disarmed, Dadier momentarily loses his sense of control and begins to slam the boy against a chalkboard over and over while muttering gibberish. He is furious with Artie and, given that this film was initially aimed at adult viewers, this moment is cathartic, fulfilling the viewer’s own desire to throttle

teenage independence. However, the film does not end on this pessimistic moment of generational conflict and the break down of law and order. After Artie and another teen are duly deposited in the principal's office, the film offers up a more congenial image of the relationship between teenage delinquents and adult rule makers: the formerly rebellious Greg Miller (Sidney Poitier) and his teacher, Mr. Dadier, both agree not to quit high school (attending it and teaching it, respectively). The final shot of the film shows both men framed against the front of North Manual High School, an image restoring authority to adult-run institutions.

By the mid- to late 1960s the teen-targeted exploitation film appears to have split in half, along the lines of its dual address to teenagers. On the one hand, many B-films appeared to abandon the possibility of reincorporating or containing teenage deviance; these films see little possibility of hope for the teens they depict. Delinquent teenagers, some of whom had at least the possibility of being recuperated into the dominant hegemony in earlier teenpics, are now completely outside the bounds of society. In *Teenage Gang Debs* (1966, Sande N. Johnson), for example, the teenage gang members and their "debs" (i.e., girlfriends) engage in torture, murder and gang rapes and their parents have no say over what they do or where they go. Justice in this film is not established by a representative of the mainstream, official society, but rather by the JDs themselves, such as when a deb is sentenced to disfigurement by switchblade at the film's conclusion, thus restoring order to the gang. Concurrent with these pessimistic films was another cycle which viewed teens not as unrecuperable rebels but as "clean-cut kids who just wanted to have fun" (Betrock 100). In 1963, AIP released *Beach Party* (1963, William Asher), starring "clean teenpic" staples Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon, which, despite Samuel Arkoff's initial reservations, was a huge success with the teenage market (Betrock 102). This film, and the cycle of clean teenpics it spawned, paints a teenage world which is free of angst, rebellion, drugs

and most importantly, parents. For example, *Beach Party* opens with a shot of sunny beach and upbeat rock n' roll music, which then cuts to a close up of Frankie (Frankie Avalon) and Dee Dee (Annette Funicello) smiling as their convertible speeds along the highway. They sing, without a care in the world, "Vacation is here, beach party tonight!" The biggest dilemma these teens face is whether or not the evening's bonfire will be a success or if they will find true love that summer—a far cry from the drug addictions, pregnancies and murder charges of their JD teenpic forbearers. Alan Betrock believes that these films were successful because during the mid-1960s, when the world was threatened with assassinations, Vietnam and violent racial uprisings, the beach party films offered "a fantasy vision of life without serious problems" (102). While many teenagers were embracing the new counterculture of the 1960s, with its protests, long hair and progressive rock n' roll, a segment of the youth population "fought steadily to hold onto what was safe, fun and familiar" (105).

### **3.5 PULLING THE MARGINS INTO THE CENTER: THE GHETTO ACTION CYCLE**

The ghetto action cycle (and the 1980s cycle of hip hop films which preceded it), like the JD teenpic cycle, was responsible not only for solidifying the mainstream understanding of hip hop culture and its related activities and styles, but also for the demystification, containment and/or neutralization of the threatening aspects of this subculture. *Boyz N the Hood*, which helped to establish the critical and financial viability of this cycle, is exemplary in this sense, since in many ways it provides viewers with two different films, depending on which protagonist the viewer chooses to focus on. For instance, Tre's narrative is about a young juvenile delinquent who is,

initially, negatively shaped by his dire socioeconomic circumstances (his teachers are disaffected, his neighborhood is littered with dead bodies, and his friends are publicly arrested for stealing). However, a strong adult authority figure, his father, continually regales him with “messages with a capital M”<sup>162</sup> concerning how to be a man and how to survive the ‘hood. Furious’ teachings are put to the test at the film’s conclusion when Tre is faced with a difficult choice: accept the untimely death of his friend, Ricky, with adult stoicism, or follow his youthful desire for revenge by seeking out and murdering the killers. This moment is, of course, marked with a lengthy speech from Furious, who convinces Tre to hand over his gun. As in *Teenage Doll*, the delinquent’s choice to relinquish his/her firearm to an adult symbolizes a surrendering of authority, even as it signals the JD’s transition into adulthood (in the teenpic being an adult is equated with following orders). This choice is then visualized, as it is in so many JD teenpics, with an embrace between father and son, between adult rule maker and juvenile rule follower. However, a few minutes later Tre has second thoughts and impulsively joins Doughboy on his quest to avenge Ricky. Tre’s turmoil over this difficult decision is also conveyed visually: the film alternately cuts from a medium close up of Tre, in the car on his way to the murder, with shots of Furious methodically rolling a set of harmony balls in one hand. The series of shots culminates in Tre asking Doughboy to stop the car so he can get out—his father’s sage advice ultimately wins out over his revenge impulse. When Tre returns home, however, Furious does not embrace him, as he did earlier in the scene—Tre is now too independent to embrace. Instead, the two men stare each other down in a tense series of shot/reverse shots. The redemptive embrace necessary for the audience to feel some measure of closure, however, appears in the next and final scene of the film, between Doughboy and Tre. After Doughboy explains how

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<sup>162</sup> See Chapter 2 for a discussion of this social problem film convention in which a figure of authority presents a social message simultaneously to a character in the film as well as the viewing audience.

vengeance brought him little satisfaction, he stands up to return to his home. But Tre calls him back, telling him “You still got one brother left,” and then he embraces his friend. Here, Tre has taken on the responsibility of the comforter. He has accepted his father’s worldview, much as Jim Stark ultimately accepts his father’s worldview at the conclusion of *Rebel without a Cause*, by becoming the adult role model for Doughboy. As a representative of the adult world, Tre confers his blessing and forgiveness to Doughboy, who remains unrepentant at the end of the film (much as Plato dies for his inability to take on adult responsibilities).

*Menace II Society*, which revels in nihilistic images of drug dealing, car theft and murder, eventually contains these images in the film’s climax, when Caine, having made the decision to abandon his criminal ways, is shot down by an old enemy. His voice over explains the reason behind this seemingly unfair demise “I had done too much to turn back. And I’d done too much to go on. I guess in the end, it all catches up with you.” Of course, *Menace II Society* tweaks the moralistic ending of the 1950s JD teenpic in that during the fatal drive by shooting, an innocent, Sharif, is killed, while the film’s poster child for delinquency, O-Dog, is spared. In the JD teenpic the death of an innocent is often used to illustrate the unintended effects of teen criminality (i.e., Plato’s death in *Rebel without a Cause*) but these films always conclude with redemption, incarceration and/or the death of the most egregious delinquents. But *Menace*’s conclusion leaves the viewer with a definitive sense of unease and the feeling that justice has not been served. O-Dog is alive and well and therefore the criminal acts depicted in the film—carjacking, drug dealing and murder—will continue. Therefore, *Menace* violates the rules of the JD teenpic, which promises to clean up the messes it creates over the course of the film. Such a conclusion marks *Menace* as more progressive than *Boyz N the Hood*, which indicates that the problems of today’s youth are successfully being resolved. Instead, *Menace* continues to

implicate the viewer, especially with the film's final image of a gangsta aiming a double barreled shot gun at the viewer and pulling the trigger.

The conclusion to *Original Gangstas* provides an interesting take on the teenpic's convention of reasserting the dominance of adult hegemony. The film, which is about a group of adult vigilantes (the "original gangstas" of the film's title, played by icons of the blaxploitation cycle, including Pam Grier, Richard Roundtree and Jim Brown) reclaiming the depressed, working class, Rust Belt town of Gary, Indiana, from the rule of a gang of murderous, young gangsta punks appropriately named the "Rebels." The film indicates that the local adults, whether because of fear or apathy, have lost control of their streets to these wild youth. The first half of the film allows the viewer to indulge in the gang's delinquency: they terrorize neighborhood residents, murder people who do not comply with their demands and make statements like "I'm God!" while pointing a gun at a victim's head. However, over the course of the film it is revealed that the Rebels which now terrorize the town of Gary were actually founded many years ago by the film's heroes, the "original gangstas." Of course, as Bookman (Fred Williamson) points out in a television interview, "But we didn't kill people!" thus positioning the current brand of delinquency as far worse than the harmless high jinks he engaged in as a teenager in the 1960s and 1970s. The film's conclusion therefore strongly enacts the theory that adults are ultimately responsible for the behavior of today's youth and therefore they must intervene if the problem is ever going to end.

However, while films like *Rebel without a Cause* and *Boyz N the Hood* recommend that adults talk to their children and provide them with strong moral examples, *Original Gangstas* recommends wholesale annihilation. The O.G.'s gather firearms, bait the Rebels into a confrontation in the streets, and then mow them down with gunfire and various

booby traps. The remainder of the adult neighborhood soon joins in the fight, violently beating any Rebels who come onto their property. In the film's final cathartic fight sequence, Jake (Jim Brown) engages in hand to hand combat with the leader of the Rebels, Spyro (Christopher B. Duncan). As the two generations face off in the middle of an abandoned, overgrown factory complex (one primary cause of Gary's current socioeconomic woes), the camera tracks around them. After Jake punches Spyro, the boy stands up, wipes his mouth and sneers "You remind me of my old man...See, *I'm* your son. See, you made me what I am. You created me and now you want to kill me?" For a moment, this sentiment resonates with Jake, a former gang member who lost his own son to gang violence. But only for a moment. Jake grabs Spyro's knife and stabs him in the gut. There is no opportunity for discussion here; the unrecuperable youth must be eliminated. *Original Gangstas* is one of the most overt stagings of the battle between adults and teenagers, law and order and delinquency, the status quo and rebellion, found in the ghetto action cycle, though this subtext appears in just about every film in the cycle. Furthermore, Spyro's statement points to the mainstream market's relationship with the teenager in general: the adult community (including social scientists, the media, filmmakers, music producers, politicians and religious groups) identified the concept of the "teenager," nurtured this image in order to profit from it (whether financially or as a way for rallying support for a political platform), and then, upon seeing what they created, recoiled in horror and demanded its death.

Of course, it is important to remember that in reality, teenagers were not duped in this commodification process—they understood that even as these films were being made for them, they nevertheless painted an unflattering portrait of teen life. For example, in a November 1956 edition of *Dig!* one teenager complained about the way that the teenpic *Teenage Crime Wave* (1955, Fred F. Sears) advertised itself as "The story of today's wild youth.": "This type of

phony advertising misleads the adults into thinking that *all* teenagers are bad, instead of realizing that it's only 2% of the teenagers that get into trouble" (Pelath 5). And in a 1960 issue of *Dig!* magazine, a teenager wrote in to complain about the portrayal of teenagers in contemporary movies: "Adults say, [the problems in contemporary society are] our fault because we have 'corrupt, vulgar minds.' Did they ever stop to realize that our minds wouldn't be so 'corrupt and vulgar' if *they* didn't give us the atmosphere in which to build these thoughts?" The teen explains that it is impossible to avoid "filthy" movies: "And who creates this filth? Adults...The same adults who blame us, the victims of their horrid money-making schemes, for the trouble in the world today" (Travers 24). This letter raises a valid point—youth were being blamed for their appetites for crime, sex and horror and yet, they were only able to consume these films because adult-run film studios created them.<sup>163</sup>

### 3.6 CONCLUSIONS: THE LAW OF ENTROPY

In the previous chapter I read the ghetto action film through the lens of the social problem film, specifically, the Dead End Kids cycle and its B-film spin-offs, in order to theorize how cycles originate, flourish and change, and to understand how both cycles successfully exploited various real and media-generated concerns about the contemporary plight of urban youth. While the goal of that chapter was to address how the study of cycles (as opposed to genres) opens up the possibility of determining the pattern of changes that groups of films follow from the moment of their initial popularity until they seemingly (though never truly) disappear from the cultural

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<sup>163</sup> Note to reader: I intend to pursue this research further in order to determine what the ghetto action cycle's teenage audience thought about the exploitation and promotion of this cycle.

radar, it also highlighted the synergistic relationship between popular culture and film cycles. This chapter took that argument one step further, by investigating, not just how the film industry exploits the sociocultural *zeitgeist* by creating film cycles, but also how those film cycles, in turn, serve to shape, influence and even create subcultural styles. Of course, what is most fascinating about both film cycles is that, while they sought to establish what was cutting edge and antiestablishment for the contemporary teenage market, these films were the products of the very establishment that their target market was rebelling against. Thus, this chapter read the youth subcultures of the 1950s and 1990s as forms of rebellion originating from within the subcultures themselves, but also as products generated by the media and film industry which were sold back to youth as “authentic.”

Dick Hebdige has argued that the concept of the subculture, that is, a culture which is somehow separate from and in defiance of the dominant culture, is a paradox: “It is...difficult...to maintain any absolute distinction between commercial exploitation on the one hand and creativity/originality on the other, even though these categories are emphatically opposed in the value systems of most subcultures” (95). In order for a subculture to spread beyond a few individuals and thus *become* a subculture, it must be publicized or packaged in some way, whether through the mass production of a CD or clothing style, a nationally published article, a televised news report or, more recently, through internet blogs. For example, in the 1980s, most teenagers probably made the decision to purchase a pair of Adidas sneakers *after* hearing Run DMC sing their praises on the single “My Adidas” (1986). Run DMC would ask fans to take off their Adidas and hold them in the air during concerts (much as fans hold up their

lighters or cell phones during ballads at rock concerts).<sup>164</sup> Furthermore, after the success of this single, Run DMC were given their own line of Adidas sneakers to design and promote. Here we see how, while subcultures initially pose a “symbolic challenge to a symbolic order,” these subcultures are inevitably, almost *instantaneously*, recuperated into the very system they are supposedly challenging. The paradox of these subcultural behaviors is that despite their ability to provide marginal voices with a forum for critiquing the dominant hegemony, the moment of their exposure beyond a small group of individuals marks the moment that these behaviors became products to be marketed and sold by the mainstream—the very entity that these subcultures are supposedly critiquing.

Though Hebdige addressed this issue back in 1979 I think his arguments are worth addressing again today, in light of the diffusion of hip hop culture, or to use Gray’s term “hyper blackness” (148) throughout mainstream culture. Hebdige has argued that with the diffusion of punk music and style in the 1970s, there was a proliferation of articles about the “rags to riches” success stories of various people involved in the punk industry, leading to the feeling of “energy, expansion and limitless upward mobility. This ultimately reinforced the image of the open society which the very presence of the punk subculture...had originally contradicted” (99). A similar pattern of contradiction occurred with rock n’ roll. Though rock n’ roll is rooted in a defiance of social restrictions (on sexual behavior, racial mixing, defying authority figures), it eventually became nothing more than a commodity to line the pockets of those against whom such music had initially been directed. This process of spectacular consumption likewise neutered the filmic JD. Their ability to generate anxiety in the culture at

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<sup>164</sup> See the documentary *Just for Kicks* (2005, Thibaut de Longeville and Lisa Leone), which documents hip hop’s obsession with sneakers. The film includes footage from a Run DMC concert where the audience appears as a sea of sneakers.

large formed the crux of their appeal but once they had become familiar enough to cease being an Other to mainstream society, the filmic JDs were no longer commercially viable *as* rebels. Today, representations of black style and youth subcultures “are the major conduits through which the commodification of multiculturalism...proceeds” (Gray xvi). However, just because these images are viable commodities does not mean that American culture has made great strides towards racial and class equality. In both cases, what appears as an acceptance of the (generational, economic and racial) difference of subcultures is more accurately described as an acceptance of the commercial viability of subcultures. In other words, while the mainstream has fully accepted and embraced rap music, many of its political messages have fallen away: “Through an intense combination of media manipulation and artistic culpability, the issue of class struggle has been reduced to mere spectacle, as opposed to a sustained critical interrogation of domination and oppression” (Boyd “Check Yo Self” 327).

Michael Jarrett offers a more positive, counter reading to this phenomenon of cooptation. He explains that most histories of the popularization of modern music and, I would add, any subcultural phenomenon in general, employ a physical science model: “What semioticians call conventionalization is most often characterized as a cultural equivalent of the second law of thermodynamics” (168). The law of entropy, the belief that “energy tends toward a state of equilibrium” (or to apply it more specifically to subcultures, whatever is hip or innovative will inevitably become conventional), is one of the foundational myths of subcultural studies (168). Likewise, conventionalization is almost always described as a *negative* process, as a loss of quality, originality and purity. Jarrett adds that this model is appealing, not only because it seems to account for how certain marginal cultural tastes become mainstream, but also because it is politically correct, explaining how (white) commercial interests have historically plundered

and degraded black, “authentic” cultures (169). But Jarrett suggests that conventionalization is a necessary component of all forms of creative expression because it helps to “digest” the decaying matter of culture, refertilizing it so that new material may grow. Before artistic innovations can occur, the material of popular culture must first be properly digested—that is, it must be consumed by a mainstream audience. The process of conventionalization, rather than destroying art, “fosters artistic renewal by generating conditions which allow for aberrant readings” (Jarrett 174). That is, once a form of cultural expression has become an entrenched part of the mainstream it becomes possible for innovators to “misread” this expression, thus creating an innovation or a new interpretation of the initial expression: “In every case the rock musician perceived as innovative is the one who has creatively misread the popularized or conventionalized version of the compost pile produced by a previously recognized innovation” (176).

We can usefully apply this argument to the relationship between subcultures and film cycles. Film producers take the pieces of American culture that they perceive to be to new, exciting and/or scandalous and translate these fragments into saleable filmic images. Once these youth subcultures were conventionalized by their appearance in film cycles, they became available for numerous “aberrant” readings: clean teen films, youth cult films (like *Easy Rider* [1969, Dennis Hopper]), 1980s teenpics (*The Outsiders* [1983, Francis Ford Coppola]), *The Breakfast Club* [1985, John Hughes], *The River’s Edge* [1986, Tim Hunter], etc.), and of course, the ghetto action cycle of the 1990s. In other words, while the exploitation of the 1950s youth subcultures seemed to rob it of its originality and creativity, it also resulted in, among other things, a rich array of film cycles. Here we can see how the existence of many film cycles are predicated on subcultures, and how subcultures are dependent on organs of the mainstream, like

film cycles, for their existence and sustainability. Film cycles are not so much the parasitic organs of mainstream culture, sucking the money (and originality) out of subcultural innovations, rather, they are better understood, as Jarrett might put it, as popular culture's "recyclers." They break down the organic material of popular culture to such an extent that, over time, this material can become the basis for future innovations. Films like *Rebel without a Cause* and *Boyz N the Hood* depict a subculture—the teenager of the 1950s and early 1990s respectively—at a time when the mainstream was not yet fully aware of the contours of these subcultures. The existence of these films, however, alerted even more teenagers to the existence of certain clothing styles, slang terms and musical artists, allowing those teenagers to generate new, "aberrant" readings of these images, a practice which serves to further expand and renew subcultural practices. Indeed, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 5, the imagery and ethos of the gangsta is continuing to be read and deployed in new ways in today's cultural landscape in the form of the hip hop music video. The ghetto action cycle (another "aberrant reading" of the JD teenpic) offers contemporary artists a deep well of iconic imagery to redeploy and redefine. Thus, while most critics read film cycles as structures which function to kill concepts or characters that were once innovative and fresh, in reality, film cycles are a necessary part of the distribution, distillation and transformation of commercial imagery.

One aspect of the exploitation process that I have not addressed in this chapter is how this process functions, that is, how a film's images are shaped and marketed to their target demographic. Likewise, while I addressed how teenagers were eventually disgusted with their own exploitation in the 1950s and 1990s, I have not discussed how and why exploitation films are so often viewed as appealing to what is most base and unrefined in our culture and how and why these films can go from luring audiences to repelling them. In the next chapter I examine the

so-called “blaxploitation” cycle—films in which black characters took the center stage as crime-fighting foxes, suave pimps and sexual conquistadors—and how and why audiences went from demanding images of blackness only to *reject* them a few years later. I will analyze ghetto action cycle through this lens to uncover how the exploitation of “blackness” is integral to both the creation and, eventually, the demonization of a film cycle.

#### **4.0 THE BLAXPLOITATION CYCLE: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF RACE IN THE CREATION OF A FILM CYCLE?**

“The exploitation movies went a little further because that’s what they had to sell. They didn’t have Paul Newman right?”

Quentin Tarantino (qtd. in Martinez 192).

“I liked [*Juice*] very much and it’s particularly well cast, but I decided it would be hard for me, in good conscience, to distribute a picture solely to exploit a volatile issue to a young black audience.”

Quote from a studio head who passed on *Juice* (qtd. in Busch and King).

#### **4.1 THE “BLACK FILM BOOM”**

In previous chapters I read the ghetto action cycle through the lens of its generic elements (the gangster film), its focus on and eventual distortion of “serious” social issues (the Dead End Kids cycle) and its exploitation of youth subcultures (the 1950s JD teenpic). These lenses, while important for understanding the vast range of texts and contexts which have influenced and inspired the themes and images of the ghetto action cycle, have all but ignored the most central way in which this cycle has been read and understood by audiences, critics and the media: race. Indeed, out of all of the cycles I have discussed so far, it is the blaxploitation cycle which is most frequently invoked in discussions of this cycle. Discourses surrounding these films (emanating from film reviewers, popular culture analysts, industry insiders and academics) consistently mentioned that they were directed by black directors, focused on “black” issues and themes

(which in the early 1990s, was, apparently, inner city crime, drug dealing, gang culture and drive-by shootings), and starred all-black casts. For example, the 1991 *Newsweek* article “A Bad Omen for Black Movies?” analyzed the outbreaks of violence that occurred after the release of *New Jack City* (1991, Mario Van Peebles) and *Boyz N the Hood* (1991, John Singleton) and speculates about whether this violence will somehow curb the much publicized “creative boom among young [black] directors.” While the article mentions that other films addressing urban violence that did *not* have black directors or predominantly black casts, such as *Colors* (1988, Dennis Hopper) and *The Warriors* (1979, Walter Hill), were also linked with outbreaks of audience violence at the time of their release, the authors nevertheless tie these new outbreaks of violence to the films’ status as “black” films, rather than as films about gangs, urban crime and male aggression (traits these films also share with *Colors* and *The Warriors*). In fact, only a handful of the nineteen so-called black films released in 1991 (*New Jack City*, *Boyz N the Hood*, *A Rage in Harlem* [Bill Duke] and *Straight Out of Brooklyn* [Matty Rich]), deal with violent subject matter. Nevertheless, this article implies that all of the films which were considered to be a part of the “black film boom” would somehow be affected by the theater violence associated with *New Jack City* and *Boyz N the Hood*.

I quote this article to illustrate how the films included under the rubric of the 1991 “black film boom”—including entries as diverse as the experimental, independent feature *Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash), comedies like *Livin’ Large* (Michael Schultz) and *True Identity* (Charles Lane), and a period drama about a fictional R & B vocal group, *The Five Heartbeats* (Robert Townsend)—were often discussed collectively as a genre or cycle of “black” films, much as any black-focused film released in the 1970s—including social problem films like *Souder* (1972, Martin Ritt), dramas like *Claudine* (1974, John Berry) and teenpics like *Cooley*

*High* (1975, Michael Schultz)—was eventually labeled as “blaxploitation.” In the case of both film cycles, the lens of race was not neutrally applied; by the mid-1970s the term “blaxploitation” had acquired a pejorative meaning, implying that someone (the black audience) or something (blackness itself) was being exploited. Likewise, in the 1990s, black films, particularly those films dealing with stories about inner city life, were lumped together and consequently shared the taint of violence that occurred at screenings of films like *New Jack City*, *Boyz N the Hood* and later, *Juice* (1992, Ernest R. Dickerson). As a result black films became associated with violence, spectacle and the exploitation of real life tragedies.

This term, “exploitation,” carries with it a host of negative signifiers; exploitation films are alternately characterized as unsophisticated, shameful, corrupting or base, adjectives which often stem from the exploitation film’s presumed illicit subject matter. As Eric Schaefer argues, beginning in 1919 and continuing on through the late 1950s, exploitation films were the primary visual medium for telling stories of the “socially marginalized” such as disease carriers, criminals, drug addicts and those choosing “alternative lifestyles” (“Hygiene” 34). These films made “unacceptable topics” and images, which were normally invisible or covered over within mainstream culture (such as the creation of leper colonies or the banishment of unwed mothers to convents), both visible and central. Audiences went to see these films because they showcased a spectacle of the unknown and the forbidden, leading Schaefer to conclude that: “Unlike the classical Hollywood film, the exploitation film was essentially an exhibitionistic form which positioned the viewer in a fundamentally different way” (“Hygiene” 34). Craig Fischer likens the exploitation film’s mode of address to pornography’s mode of address. That is, the exploitation film is defined not so much by its narrative elements as it is by its descriptive moments (19)—set pieces highlighting what is deviant, aberrant or marginal to mainstream society. And since

exploitation films are by definition those films which cannot afford big name stars, directors or production values, they must rely on the box-office draw of their subject matter and on the promise of providing audiences with a peek into worlds and lifestyles which mainstream films<sup>165</sup> ignore or marginalize.

If we accept this premise—that exploitation films succeed because they sell their audiences images which are unacceptable within the confines of mainstream filmmaking practices—then the presence and overwhelming financial success of the blaxploitation and ghetto action cycles would indicate that, at the time of their release, these images of blackness were considered to be too sensational for mass consumption. Thus the goal of this chapter is to read the 1990s ghetto action cycle through this paradigm of race (by way of the 1970s blaxploitation cycle) in order to understand how and why race, specifically blackness, is able to be viewed as a product or hook to be exploited. I will explore: how is blackness made sensational and titillating at different points in film history? What does this packaging of blackness reveal about the film industry's (as well as the audience's) troubled relationship with race and representation? Finally, what is the role of race or representations of race in the formation (and eventual demise) of a successful film cycle?

In order to understand how images of “blackness” and the depiction of a “black point of view” were both defined and marketed in the 1970s and 1990s, and to appreciate how the contentious issue of race in America was successfully exploited for the launch of two influential and prolific film cycles, I want to employ, as I did in Chapter 2, Janet Staiger's model

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<sup>165</sup> As Mark Jancovich has pointed out, concepts like “commercial cinema” or “mainstream cinema” are constructs which gain meaning only through their juxtaposition with concepts like “cult cinema” or exploitation cinema (“Cult Fictions” 308). When I use terms like “mainstream cinema” it is not to pejoratively connote films which are consumed by a naïve mass audience. Rather, I will be using terms like “mainstream cinema” as place holders to signify those films which are made under studio conditions and intended for a wide (as opposed to niche) audience.

of historical reception analysis. Throughout the remainder of this chapter I will be critically reading the discourses surrounding these two film cycles, including studio-issued press kits, posters, contemporary interviews, film trailers and the mainstream media's coverage of the films. While the previous chapters focused primarily on the filmic text, this chapter will concentrate almost entirely on these public discourses in order to understand how the viewing experience of the blaxploitation and ghetto action cycles was configured for contemporary audiences. Keeping in mind that these two cycles generated outrage from representatives of both the black and white communities, including religious leaders, political groups, academics and fellow filmmakers, over their misrepresentation of blackness, and that the weight of this outrage, particularly in the case of blaxploitation films, led to the demise of each cycle, I will use the parallels between the two cycles to determine how issues of race can exhaust a cycle's potential, just as they initially helped to create it. Furthermore, although the discourses surrounding both film cycles center on their representation of race and race relations, I would argue that these discourses function in slightly different ways in each decade.

#### **4.1.1 Exploitation and Blackface**

Frederick Douglass once denounced white minstrels as “the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens” (qtd. in Lott *Love* 15). Inherent in Douglass' words is a doubled understanding of exploitation. He is objecting to the fact that white society is using the black image, an image which, historically, has denied its bearers economic and social opportunities in America, as a tool to make money for themselves. But he is also outraged that these white minstrel performances, the source of so much income, also served to

further perpetuate the very stereotypes that created the economic and social disparity experienced by black Americans in the late 1800s. I quote Douglass here because these sentiments are echoed, albeit in a slightly different form, by opponents of the blaxploitation cycle in the 1970s and the ghetto action cycle in the 1990s. Indeed, the primary objections to both film cycles rested on these twin concerns: that the images in these film cycles both created and perpetuated negative stereotypes about the contemporary black community and that primarily white studios were profiting from the sale of these damaging images.

Although minstrel shows, with white actors performing in blackface, date back to the late 1600s, black minstrelsy, that is, minstrel shows performed by black actors (who often darkened their faces and hands with burnt cork like their white counterparts), began to appear around the mid-1800s (Haskins 23). These black minstrels marketed themselves to white audiences by claiming that their performances were more “authentic” than those of white minstrels. Their primary marketing hook was to offer white audiences the rare chance to observe black people as they “really are” in an all-black milieu. For example, one promoter created an 1879 advertisement claiming that his all-black troupe of minstrels would portray “The darky as he is at home, darky life in the cornfield, canebrake, barnyard, and on the levee and flatboat” (qtd. in Toll 205). As for African American spectators, who also constituted a large part of the audience for black minstrel shows, the lure of these performances was most likely grounded in the fact that they so seldom had the opportunity to see real black faces performing on a public stage. It is also possible that black audiences, like white audience, had internalized and consequently believed in, the validity of the stereotypes (Toll 258). By contrast, upwardly mobile or educated African Americans tended to frown upon these performances. As Louis Chude-Sokei

argues in his study of the Afro-Caribbean minstrel, Bert Williams, *The Last Darky: Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (2006):

During a historical moment [the 1910s] defined by ‘positive,’ ‘affirming,’ and tightly self-controlled images and expectations of blacks, one can imagine the threatening and liberating appeal of a black minstrel to a black audience...what was often being resisted in Williams’s [*sic*] black minstrelsy is not only white-generated racial stereotypes but also those cultural traits, habits and modes of being that did not fit the dominant representation of racial uplift during a time where the dominant politics was driven by the bourgeois desire for consolidation and the self-righteous moralism of appropriate representation. (99)

Similar objections have been made about the black stud stereotype glamorized by blaxploitation characters like Sweetback (Melvin Van Peebles) in *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971, Melvin Van Peebles) and the hypermasculine criminal stereotype perpetuated by ghetto action characters like Doughboy (Ice Cube) in *Boyz N the Hood* (1991, John Singleton). As Jane Gaines has astutely noted, by way of Steve Neale, much of these criticisms of black filmic representation are not based on the fact that they are stereotypes, but that they are the *wrong* stereotypes: “objectionable types are not measured against real people at all; rather, they are compared with a characterization that could serve as a ‘positive’ image for the minority group (as opposed to a ‘negative’ one). It is this ‘positive’ image that is an idealization. Here the rhetorical flaw is in the assumption that the ‘positive’ image is not itself also a stereotype” (261). Gaines’ argument also underscores the high stakes of black filmic representation, how difficult it is to strike the right note. Given these parallels between the ideologically fraught performance of blackness in the minstrel tradition and the performance of blackness in the blaxploitation and

ghetto action cycles, the concept of blackface will aid in my analysis of exploitation cinema and its relationship to representations of racial difference and will help to explain the complicated origins and implications of the black images residing in both cycles, as well as the role of race in the construction, shaping and reception of a film cycle. This chapter will focus on these intertwined concerns—how the constructedness of the black image, while always tied to the white commodification of black culture (since white concerns always already structure the film industry), nevertheless points to an interracial collaboration.

Eric Lott, who has completed extensive work on the origins and history of the minstrel tradition in American popular culture, defines blackface as an enactment of the constructedness of racial identity and difference in the United States (“White” 475). For example, white spectators in the mid-1800s demanded “authentic” black minstrel shows, but only on the condition that these shows were performed by white actors (because to watch black performers would have been considered improper).<sup>166</sup> Although these “counterfeit” blackface performances were predicated on a seemingly authentic black cultural expression, they were nevertheless the white interpretation of black performances, with the actors wearing a literal mask of “blackness.” When black performers did perform in minstrel shows they were likewise donning this mask, first created by white performers. For example, Lott recounts an anecdote about Charles Mathews, a famous white minstrel, who was known primarily for his caricatures of the black Shakespearean actor, Ira Aldridge. Contemporary audiences were under the impression that Mathews’ popular act was a direct parody of the Aldridge’s performance in *Hamlet*, including a colloquialized rendition of the famous “To be or not be” soliloquy. White

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<sup>166</sup> Louis Chude-Sokei explains that “the notion of minstrelsy and its discourses of authenticity were so formalized and institutionalized that the very notion that a black performer could *outperform* a white performer in a white form such as minstrelsy was unimaginable. Yes, the idea that a *Negro could play a Negro better than a white man* was both ludicrous and heretical” (Chude-Sokei 6).

audiences, having been told that Aldridge was the source of the parody, consistently requested that Aldridge perform the same character and soliloquy in his own shows, a request he eventually obliged. However, Ira Aldridge later admitted in interviews that he had never performed in a production of *Hamlet*. Mathews' act was the product of his imagination, of how he believed a black actor might interpret Shakespeare, making Aldridge's later performance an impersonation of a fabrication. Thus, "it was possible for a black man in blackface, without a great deal of effort, to offer credible imitations of white men imitating him" (Lott *Love* 228).

This anecdote brings to light the complicated history of black representation, black performance and the commodification of and reliance upon (what is believed to be) "authentic" blackness. Although blackface performances were marketed to white audiences based upon the sales pitch that they were authentic replications of contemporary African American dialect, style and behaviors, these performances were, in reality, a white performers' translation of what they saw as authentic black culture. The black minstrels following in the footsteps of white minstrels therefore were imitating white performers, not themselves. Famous black minstrels like Ira Aldridge and Bert Williams (who was of Caribbean descent) were thus highly aware that what they were performing was not an authentic representation of contemporary black culture, but rather an authentic representation of contemporary racial stereotypes. This move stresses how, in the realm of minstrelsy, the concept of "racial authenticity was utterly independent of race and utterly dependent on performance" (Chude-Sokei 28) and how race was "a cultural invention rather than some precious essence installed in black bodies" (Lott *Love* 39). The outrageous images of happy, ignorant slaves and uppity, Northern dandies found in minstrel shows were received as authentic because white audiences

were told that they *were* authentic (and for many these images may have further bolstered the negative views they already held of the African American community).

This notion of race as performance or cultural invention is also key to understanding how it might be possible to read the black minstrel tradition, as well as the images of blackness deployed by the blaxploitation and ghetto action cycles, as something other than purely damaging and exploitative. Chude-Sokei argues convincingly that the black performer's use of blackface cannot be uniformly read as an instance of racial self-hatred. Rather, Chude-Sokei interprets Bert Williams'<sup>167</sup> minstrel performances as a "claim to authority over the representations of African Americans" (6) and an attempt to erase the "explicitly racist and politically unnatural fiction" of white blackface minstrelsy from within (6). Chude-Sokei acknowledges that Williams' strategies of irony and provocation—such as the choice to call his act with George Walker "The Two Real Coons"—was a "delicate tightrope of representation" that could and often was misread by both black and white audiences (7). However, he argues that for performers like Williams the minstrel mask was an exaggeration of whiteness, a performance that made white comedians, not black comedians, look ridiculous (33). So when a black performer dons blackface, it is an act representing the "dispossession and control by whites of black forms" as well as a "public display of black irony toward whites who had tried to become better blacks" (Lott "The Seeming Counterfeit" 229). I believe that the stereotypes of black life which circulate through blaxploitation and ghetto action films likewise bear this doubled role.

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<sup>167</sup> Bert Williams is mentioned frequently in this chapter because he is the case study that Louis Chude-Sokei employed for his discussion and analysis of "black-on-black" minstrelsy in *The Last Ducky*. Sokei describes Williams as the first black performer who "could be described as an international pop star." In addition to being the most famous performer in black popular theater at the time, he also successfully crossed over to white audiences, appearing on Broadway (by way of the Ziegfeld Follies), in two-reel comedies like *A Natural Born Gambler*, and on records (1-3).

Blackface is historically contingent since it is always based upon popular definitions of what it means to be black, and by extension, what it means to be white (Lott *Love* 48). These stereotypes tell us a lot, not just about how different races view each other at different moments in history, but also about how *the producers* of these images believe audiences view each other at different moments in history. What types of black images do black audiences want to see and what types of black images do non-black audiences want to see? And if these images make money does that indicate that these images are somehow accurate or that they are simply entertaining? For example, *Menace II Society's* (1993, Allen and Albert Hughes) violent O-Dog (Larenz Tate) could be read as a critique of the images of blackness circulating throughout the early 1990s. He is playing the role of “America’s worst nightmare” by throwing stereotypes of “blackness” back into the faces of the white culture that has created them (on film, on the news, on the front pages of newspapers, etc). Yet, this image can just as easily be read by some viewers as an accurate reflection of contemporary, black, urban youth—that many of these young men have nothing to live for and are therefore willing to kill or be killed with little provocation. These contradictory readings of the same image explain why some critics faulted *Menace II Society* for its negativity while others praised it for its exposure of a pressing social problem, why some saw it as a clever critique of mediated images of the inner city and others saw it as an irresponsible exploitation of dangerous stereotypes. Likewise, some critics consumed the blackface mask of Sweetback as an image of Black Nationalist sentiments—as a revolutionary figure—while others read Sweetback as an offensive iteration of the Black Stud or Buck stereotype that thrived on America’s plantations. The box office success of both films would indicate that the interplay and ambiguity of these doubled readings mobilized ticket buyers.

The trope of blackface, a performance of blackness which can be taken up by actors of any race,<sup>168</sup> is one way to intervene in the complicated marketing and reception history of the blaxploitation and ghetto action cycles. When we understand blackness as a mask, as a careful construct that can be handed from person to person, from race to race, then we can also see how this blackness, whether it appears on the minstrel's stage or on the cinema screen, can become a commodity. Most of these images have only the flimsiest of ties (if any) to the real world experiences of the individuals they purport to represent. My understanding of the imagery found in these two cycles is based upon this notion—that these images are commodities circulating in and through Hollywood films, though their power, as I will demonstrate in my discussion of the outbreaks of theater violence surrounding the exhibition of ghetto action films, often extends beyond the movie screen. The images in these films are simultaneously described as authentic and stereotyped, as an expression of black culture and an expression of white culture's understanding of black culture, as empowering and destructive. I believe that the images in these films are all of these things, and that they can be read in multiple, even contradictory ways, by audiences of all racial backgrounds. The history of black filmic representation is laden with an array of doubled meanings, a “complex dialectic,” which, like the history of blackface, involves “a continual oscillation between fascination with ‘blackness’ and fearful ridicule of it, underscored but not necessarily determined by an oscillation between sympathetic belief in blackface's authenticity and ironic distance from its counterfeit representations” (Lott “The Seeming Counterfeit” 227).

To this end it is useful to turn to Jacqueline Najuma Stewart's work on preclassical black film imagery in *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity*

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<sup>168</sup> For example, the character of Jimmie Dimmick (Quentin Tarantino) in *Pulp Fiction* (1994, Quentin Tarantino) is an example of a white character performing in blackface.

(2005). Stewart argues that most accounts of early black filmic representation argue that these images were either racist stereotypes or objective recordings of everyday life (26). This conventional account of black film history obscures “the roles African Americans have played as the *subjects* of their own history of mass culture, as individuals and communities who consistently challenged [Hollywood’s] racist and exclusionary representations” (6). Stewart thus wishes to move beyond the conventional “history of Black stereotypes” approach, by seeing these images as the products of “multiple cultural voices,” as “polyphonic, ‘speaking of’ and ‘speaking to’ constructions of Blackness produced by both whites and Americans at the turn of the twentieth century” (31). Stewart’s approach is significant to my work on blaxploitation and the ghetto action film because it highlights how black cinematic images which appear, at the outset, to be one-dimensionally racist, can also be read for the other, competing, oftentimes subversive, voices that might be lurking there.

My central interest in this chapter is to understand how these polyphonic images of blackness (the definitions of which change from decade to decade) can be used as a catalyst for the formation, marketing and eventually, the demise, of a film cycle. In Chapter 3, when I read the ghetto action cycle through the lens of teenpics, I argued that one reason why a film like *Boyz N the Hood* received studio financing was because it exploited the interests of contemporary teenagers (of all races) in hip hop culture. When I shift my lens to the blaxploitation cycle, another impetus is revealed—economic desperation. In both the 1970s and the 1990s, film studios turned to the underserved black audience to recoup their faltering box office numbers (Guerrero 158-159). This chapter will ask: what makes a film “black,” how does such a designation become *the* key to a film’s successful exploitation and how do a film’s producers convey this sense of “blackness” to the audience? And what does it mean, at specific

points in film history, to cater to a black audience, as opposed to white, Asian or Latino audience? What images do studios imagine that black audiences want to see and how and why (or why not) are such images successful?

## 4.2 RACE AND THE FORMATION OF A CYCLE

### 4.2.1 “Blaxploitation” of the Past

Although the blaxploitation cycle of the 1970s is generally considered to be the first time that black audiences were actively courted by major studios, and the first time that films centering on black characters, lifestyles and themes were produced for mainstream release in a consistent fashion, it was not the first time that images of blackness were created for and sold to a primarily black audience. While I do not wish to provide a history or analysis of early black cinema, since the subject has been addressed thoughtfully and thoroughly in numerous studies,<sup>169</sup> for the purposes of this chapter it is useful to discuss some selected examples of how images of blackness were exploited in the past. According to Eric Schaeffer, the *modus operandi* of the classical exploitation film (1919-1959), which developed alongside but separate from classical Hollywood cinema (~1929-1960), is to provide the viewer with access to a particular forbidden spectacle, which must be the film’s central focus. This focus on a forbidden spectacle serves as

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<sup>169</sup> See Paula Massood’s *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film*, Donald Bogle’s *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, Thomas Cripps’ *Black Film as Genre*, Jacqueline Najuma Stewart’s *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity*, James B. Nestey’s *Black Images in American films, 1896-1954: The Interplay Between Civil Rights and Film Culture*. etc.

the classical exploitation film's "organizing sensibility—at the expense of others" (*Bold!* 4-6).<sup>170</sup> What is interesting about this classification, however, is that Schaefer takes pains to point out that other low-budget filmmaking practices of the classical studio era, such as B-films released by Poverty Row studios like Monogram (the studio behind the Eastside Kids franchise) and Republic, and "race" films marketed to black audiences, are *not* classical exploitation films. He explains that while Poverty Row movies and race films are *linked* to classical exploitation by "their shoestring budgets and rapid shooting schedules," as well as their ability to cater to one segment of the audience, they diverge from the classical exploitation film in that they do not rely on the promise (and delivery) of "forbidden spectacle" as their *raison d'être* (75-76).

However, Schaefer's argument that race films were not sold based on the promise of a spectacle—which he defines as "something presented to fascinate the eye of the spectator" and which "exerts an immediate, affective response" (76)—discounts how the forbidden spectacle of images of blackness were deployed as *the* primary lure of classical race films. Briefly, race films were black cast and, usually, black-directed, feature films released concurrently with mainstream, white-cast Hollywood fare. It has been argued that many producers of race movies were motivated by the release and blockbuster-like success of *Birth of a Nation* (1915, D.W. Griffith) and their strong desire to depict African Americans in a different light. For example, the 1918 film, *Birth of a Race*, conceived by members and supporters of the NAACP, was created as a direct response to Griffith's film, leading Jane Gaines to describe the latter as "an irritant around which a pearl formed" (6). The subjects and styles of these race films covered the gamut: some films mimicked the efforts of the major studios, that is, by substituting

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<sup>170</sup> Other criteria that Schaefer uses to define the classic exploitation film include: it must deal with the forbidden subject directly (rather than through the use of euphemism); it is made cheaply with low production values; it frequently relies on stock footage to "pad" the film; and it is distributed independently or in theaters not associated with the majors (*Bold!* 4-6).

black faces for white, such as *The \$10,000 Trail* (1921, Sidney P. Dones) or *Black Sherlock Holmes* (1918, R.W. Phillips), while others provided stories of racial pride and uplift, like *The Trooper of Troop K* (1917, Harry A. Gant). These films were screened for almost entirely black audiences in primarily black-owned theaters. In this way: “Race movies aspired to a condition of blackness from top to bottom and celebrated striving and loving and laughing in an all-black world” (Gaines 17). Donald Bogle argues that after WWII the race film as a genre disappeared because Hollywood, in attempt to depict America as integrated and accepting, began releasing its own films dealing with “black” themes: “By the age of integration, roughly between 1947 and 1965, black film identity blended with a general American identity” (45).

While the images found in race films do not offer titillation in the same way that nudist camps or close ups of diseased genitals do, they nevertheless offer their target viewers a glimpse of what the mainstream studios did not. Like classical exploitation films, such as *Mom and Dad* (1944, William Beaudine), race films of the 20s, 30s, and early 40s were sold primarily based on their ability to provide audiences with images which had been denied mainstream treatment—namely black characters in central roles who live and work in the present and in settings (i.e., such as the city)<sup>171</sup> resembling those most familiar to the target audiences for these films. Since these images are the race film’s *raison d’etre*, “blackness” was what was being sold to the audience, rather than big name stars, directors or product quality. The primary difference, however, between classical exploitation films and race film is that while the audiences for the former were seeking out images of the (alleged) Other—the drug user, the sexually promiscuous young woman, the homosexual struggling with his identity—the audiences for the latter were seeking out images of themselves. I see a strong correlation between these images in that neither

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<sup>171</sup> See Paula Massood’s *Black City Cinema* for a discussion of the significance of the city in race movies.

market would exist if Hollywood had not deemed images of drug-using characters or contemporary black characters unsuitable material for mainstream consumption. These markets were created because audiences were denied the opportunity to see an aspect of their contemporary reality. As Jane Gaines puts it “race movies were an audacious invention that helped to make an audience that most white entrepreneurs did not see, that helped to imagine a separate community into existence” (17).

The producers of race films also had much in common with the exploiters involved in the production of classical exploitation films. Oscar Micheaux, like his white contemporaries, Louis Sonney and Samuel Cummins, secured a long career in the film industry because of his ability to fulfill multiple roles (Schaefer *Bold!* 43): he controlled the production, distribution, exhibition, and marketing of his products (Massood 49). And like Sonney and Cummins, Micheaux was personally involved in the exhibition of his films, by “literally walking his booking route and shoring up the famous network of race movie distribution to segregated houses in the East, the South and the Midwest” (Gaines 123). Of course, “hyphenates” like Micheaux, while innovative and multi-talented, were not equipped to handle the many roles they attempted to fill with the same skill as a major studio (which had entire departments of specialists filling each of those roles), and therefore these independently produced films often suffered from wooden acting, low production values, bare sets and confusing continuity. Despite the often poor quality of his films, the fact that Micheaux’s career spanned thirty years and forty films (Nesteby 75), indicates that there was, nevertheless, an eager market for his products. Micheaux’s films were primarily topical, touching on hot-button issues like lynching, “passing,” and prostitution (Nesteby 75). As a result, Micheaux was criticized by white critics who chafed at his depictions of contemporary racial issues and black critics who “had similar objections and

were upset because Micheaux often directed critiques toward the black community...or practiced a form of color casting” (Massood 40). Many of these complaints, as I will argue later in this chapter, were also directed at blaxploitation films in the 1970s.

One early example of blaxploitation, that is, the attempt to exploit images of blackness in a sensational manner, is Micheaux’s *Within Our Gates* (1919). In addition to its outsider mode of production, *Within Our Gates* can be considered an exploitation film in that it caters to a specifically black audience by focusing on images of contemporary blackness and by centering the film’s appeal in its “sensational,” forbidden subject matter—lynching. The film’s primary narrative is about a Southerner, Sylvia Landry (Evelyn Preer), who ventures North to Boston in order to raise money to save Piney Woods, an all-black school in her hometown. However, the film contains a brief back story detailing how Sylvia’s family were the victims of a lynching and the inclusion of this segment drew intense criticism from black and white critics alike. Paula Massood explains that part of the controversy over the film’s depiction of lynching is linked to the contemporary racial climate. She cites the “Red Summer of 1919” during which black residents of Chicago rose up in protest over, among other injustices, the stoning of a black youth who attempted to cross a racial line on a public city beach: “In this environment the fear was less that Micheaux’s film, released in early 1920, would spark African American protest because of what had happened months earlier and more that the film would stoke the rage smoldering the community from even before these events” (51). By staging such a controversial scene at a time when race relations were already vexed, Micheaux, like any good exploiteer, was providing his target audience with a “forbidden spectacle” that was absent from mainstream releases. Though Micheaux’s choice to direct attention to the subject of lynching was certainly a political act—after all, many Americans at this time wanted to pretend that lynching did not exist

(Lockard)—Micheaux was huckster at heart and it is likely his primary motivations were to generate a healthy profit.

It was not just a lucky coincidence that Micheaux's film was released during the vexed racial climate of the Red Summer of 1919. Jane Gaines likens Micheaux to the "circus sideshow promoter P.T. Barnum" because of his gift for fast talk, exaggeration and canny manipulation (120). She also describes him as "an instigator and actualizer, someone who not only designs the work but who orchestrates its reception" (123), and locates his rhetorical strategies within the classic exploitation tradition of ballyhoo. Ballyhoo, which Schaefer defines as that noisy, vulgar spiel that drew audiences to circuses and sideshows...a hyperbolic excess of words and images that sparked the imagination" (*Bold!* 103), promises audiences something—an image, an experience, a reaction ("This movie will nauseate you!")—that it does not necessarily fulfill. This unfulfilled promise is one of the more striking aspects of exploitation advertising—its images and slogans are often an exaggeration, and occasionally, a complete misrepresentation, of what occurs in the film itself. Schaefer explains that: "A[n exploitation] film could be completely misrepresented by the advertising and could disappoint spectators, yet the ballyhoo that preceded it was part of the overall entertainment experience, a fact the audience evidently recognized and appreciated and in which they were complicit" (*Bold!* 111).

Long before Melvin Van Peebles assessed and then targeted the needs of an underserved black audience with sensational, politically loaded images of black rebellion in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, Oscar Micheaux understood the value of effectively marketing and exploiting the politically charged imagery of *Within Our Gates*. As reflected in the ad copy for the film, Micheaux aimed to generate moral indignation in his contemporary

black audience.<sup>172</sup> For example, Micheaux promised that the incidents depicted in the film would make viewers “Grit Your Teeth in Silent Indignation” (qtd. in Gaines 169). This affect, indignation, is clearly very different from the affect generated by the classic exploitation film, which aimed to arouse, titillate, disgust or terrify the viewer. However, if the spectacle of the exploitation film image was aimed to fascinate the eye and to exert an affective response, then Micheaux is clearly partaking in that tradition. As Gaines describes the film “Yes, this is lynching as sensational spectacle” (169). Again, the difference between these spectacles lies in the viewer’s relationship to the image on screen. While images of diseased genitals in a film like *Mom and Dad* generated disgust through their otherness, or distance from the spectators, the images of lynching in *Within Our Gates* which were targeted at black audiences, generated outrage because of their similarity; many of the film’s viewers, particularly those residing in the South, would have recognized these images as a frightening aspect of their contemporary reality.

The film contains two sensational lynching scenes. First, Efrem (E.G.Tatum), a race-betraying spy, is hung when an irate crowd of white Southerners cannot find the Landry family. Although the audience is meant to dislike Efrem and what he stands for (he has falsely accused Jasper Landry [William Stark] of murdering his white boss), his hanging reflects the arbitrariness of lynch mob justice (Gaines 168). The capture and hanging of Sylvia’s parents, the Landrys, is far more devastating. Once the Landry family has been apprehended the next scene opens with a long shot of an angry, white mob in the background of the frame, charging forward. It is significant that this mob is composed, not just of men, but also of women and children. “And here is where Micheaux is at his boldest,” explains Gaines “the mob he gives us is not the usual cadre of town bullies” (168). In the next shot we see Mrs. Landry (Mattie Edwards) in the

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<sup>172</sup> Note to Reader: At some point I plan to get my hands on some of the press materials for this film. Thus far I have only read about these materials.

foreground of the shot being viciously beaten with sticks and stripped of some of her clothing. A few shots later Mrs. Landry has managed to stand up and grab hold of her young son, Emil (Grant Edwards). As she clings to him, sobbing, he is wrenched from her arms and a noose is placed around her neck. These shots, in which both women and children are abused, would have certainly caused audience members to “grit their teeth” in indignation.

The moment of the lynching is filmed in a more impressionistic style than the rest of the film, lending it an extra significance. As the crowd drags the Landrys towards the nooses, we see a small white boy jumping up and down eagerly at the edge of the frame, as if he is about to watch a circus performance. These details underscore the baroque cruelty of the lynch mob. The camera then cuts to a long shot of husband and wife with nooses around their necks, about to be hung. This image cuts to a low angle shot of the ropes hanging on the wooden scaffolding, framed against the backdrop of an overcast sky. We then see the executioners pulling on the ropes with all of their weight, followed by another low angle shot of these ropes slowly sliding over the wood. It is unclear whose perspective this is (perhaps it is the Landrys looking up at the instruments which will cause their deaths), but it artfully conveys the idea that the Landrys are being murdered, without actually showing the moment of their deaths.

*Within Our Gates* is an especially useful film to discuss within the context of black film history and exploitation since it highlights “the way the symbolism of events (inflected as socially dangerous) can become inextricably mixed up with the events themselves, especially during racially sensitive moments in history” (Gaines 161). Both the blaxploitation and ghetto action cycles were conceived during racially “sensitive” moments in history and both were construed as being “socially dangerous”; the blaxploitation cycle’s imagery was seen as damaging to the general image of urban blacks while the ghetto action cycle’s imagery was

believed to cause real bodily harm to spectators. And both cycles recreated scenes of violence (police brutality, urban uprisings, drive by shootings, etc.) that were occurring simultaneously in the real world. And like *Within Our Gates*, the formation of the blaxploitation and ghetto action cycles was tied to their ability to supply and exploit images which were absent from mainstream Hollywood productions. In the case of the blaxploitation cycle, its primary exploitable hook was imagery of defiant, empowered black heroes, an image reflecting the tropes of the Black Nationalist movement. In the ghetto action cycle, marketers promised to show audiences “truth” about life in the nation’s most crime-infested neighborhoods, and (implicitly) promised to give their viewers a taste of that life. In other words, the ballyhoo used to market ghetto action films focused not just on their violent content, but also on their potential to *generate* violence in the viewing audience. Both the blaxploitation and ghetto action cycle thus relied upon hyperbolic definitions of (primarily masculine) blackness to sell their films to the public, a tradition which, as I have just shown, dates back to the origins of black filmmaking practices.

#### **4.2.2 The Economics of Race**

Neither the blaxploitation nor the ghetto action cycles would have been able to form if Hollywood’s economic climate did not demand a quick cash infusion. As historian David Walker points out “Hollywood, and the entertainment industry as a whole, only utilizes its Black players when it is in a bind. We see a new resurgence of Black films when white films aren’t making as much money or they are not getting enough of the Black audience” (qtd. in Martinez 61). Throughout the 1960s the major studios had been losing money at the box office for several interrelated reasons including the rising popularity and widespread availability of television, “white flight” to the suburbs, and the slow dissolution of the studio system form of production.

To recoup losses, studios began investing their production money in fewer, more expensive “event” pictures. This new mode of production proved problematic when these expensive pictures failed to recover their production costs at the box office. Famous flops like *Cleopatra* (1963, Joseph L. Mankiewicz), *Star!* (1968, Robert Wise) and *Hello Dolly!* (1969, Gene Kelly) put major studios like Twentieth Century Fox, Warner Brothers and United Artists on the brink of financial ruin. However, at this time there was one segment of the audience that continued to attend the movies on a regular basis: the urban black population. This population was particularly important because with the white flight to the suburbs throughout the 1950s and 1960s, historic downtown movie palaces in the urban centers of Chicago, New York City, Washington, D.C. and parts of Los Angeles were increasingly empty (Martinez 59). As a result, studios began catering specifically to black audiences, who attended the movies out of proportion to their ratio in the population (Hartmann 382). Then, in 1971 the independently produced *Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* proved that films centering on black heroes and appealing to a black audience could rake in a massive box office.<sup>173</sup> Though Van Peebles claims that it was his film which first alerted studios to this possibility,<sup>174</sup> it is more likely the combination of the above factors, *including* Van Peebles’ innovating marketing techniques, which led to the studios’ sudden interest in films for and about a contemporary black audience.

As numerous film scholars have noted, the black audience’s initial embrace of the blaxploitation cycle is strongly tied to its articulation of Black Nationalist politics which stood in contrast to previous depictions of black characters in mainstream films. Throughout the 1950s

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<sup>173</sup> *Sweetback’s* estimated production cost was \$150,000 and its box office gross was \$15,180,000 (Martinez 58).

<sup>174</sup> In an interview in *What It Is... What It Was*, Van Peebles claims that “[*Sweetback*] was so successful that everybody jumped on the bandwagon. The original *Shaft* was a white guy. So when I made all this money, they threw in a couple of ‘mother fucks,’ found a Black guy, and made themselves a Black detective. That’s what happened” (38).

and 1960s the majority of films which centered on black characters or which took a black point of view were primarily social problem films or “message movies” emphasizing racial oppression and the need for social equality, such as *Nothing But a Man* (1964, Michael Roemer), *Raisin in the Sun* (1961, Daniel Petrie) and *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967, Stanley Kramer). While these films essentially illuminated the same racial issues later addressed by the blaxploitation cycle, in general “the portrait of the African American male painted by the problem pictures was asexual, middle-class, and more rural or suburban than urban” (Massood 80). Massood adds that these films “depicted a world and conditions that existed outside those faced by the majority of rural and urban African Americans alike” (81). Such films can be said to be reflective of the politics of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, which promoted civil disobedience as effective social protest and a politics of cooperation with the dominant white society: “Musicians, artists, and entertainers were celebrated or criticized for their ability to provide positive images, which inadvertently meant images that conformed to the acceptable standards of middle-class white behavior” (Boyd *Am I Black Enough* 19). By contrast, the Black Nationalist movement of the 1970s, which reemerged primarily in reaction to the perceived failures of the Civil Rights movement, is defined, not by a desire for assimilation into the dominant (i.e., white middle class) society, but rather, by the desire to develop a separate black identity based upon cultural, political and economic independence from white society.

Black Nationalism manifested itself in many ways: in Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association of the 1920s, in Malcolm X’s rejection of the Civil Rights movement’s politics of nonviolence in the 1960s, the Black Power slogans like “Black is beautiful,” and the Black Panther Party’s more overt promotion of armed resistance in the 1960s and 1970s (Umoja 3-8). The numerous nationally televised urban uprisings taking place

throughout the late 1960s in cities like Watts (1965), Detroit (1967), Newark (1967), and others, also had a huge impact on the nation's perception of the "black city." These images were read differently by different portions of the television audience: "Where white suburban America saw violence and destruction, black audiences saw resistance to specific wrongs of the inner city—disenfranchisement, poverty, decay and unchecked police brutality" (Massood 83-84). Blaxploitation films exploited both of these responses equally—for some viewers their characters were threatening while for others they were inspiring. Thus, as S. Craig Watkins explains, blaxploitation's "concentration on black heroes defeating corrupt white police officials and Mafia men...undoubtedly appealed to a younger generation of African Americans, who experienced the frustrations of urban rebellions, police repression, and a heightened racial backlash" (*Representing* 94).

Ed Guerrero believes that if the blaxploitation cycle did anything, it "let the black audience out of the bag" by helping shape a politically self conscious critical black audience aware of its own commercial power (137). Therefore it is not surprising that when, in the 1990s, Hollywood found itself in an economic situation similar to that of the 1960s, this awareness led to a high output<sup>175</sup> of black American directed mainstream releases. In 1991 industry profits had dropped by almost 26% as compared to the previous year. As in the 1960s, this recession hit major studios hard, while big independent studios began to go under (Guerrero 164-165). This decrease in profits was tied to a number of factors including the Gulf War (1990-1991), an economic recession, and the failure of big budgeted "tent pole" pictures to recoup their astronomical production costs. Mirroring the studios' concern with producing big-budget event

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<sup>175</sup> Of course, this term is relative. As S. Craig Watkins point out, "the substantial increase was in reality a blip on the larger filmmaking landscape...The number of theatrical releases directed by African Americans in 1991 represented roughly 5 percent of the film industry's total output that year" (*Representing* 79).

pictures throughout the 1960s, the cinema of the 1980s had relied primarily on the high concept blockbuster, a film which can be synergistically marketed with a soundtrack, product tie-ins and/or fast food deals (Balio 165). The escalating costs of these high concept or tent pole pictures, which were often dependent upon the presence of A-list actors demanding ever-increasing paychecks, meant that studios had to see a large profit on their expensive investments in order to maintain their financial solvency. Thus as in the late 1960s, the box office “failure”<sup>176</sup> of a few major productions, including *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990, Brian DePalma), *Hook* (1991, Steven Spielberg) and *The Godfather III* (1990, Francis Ford Coppola), forced studios to turn to lower budgeted films which targeted specific, identifiable markets. Once again the black audience, which in the early 1990s made up 12% of the population and 25% of the movie going audience (Bates 18), proved itself to be an ideal target. When low-budget, black directed films like *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986, Spike Lee), *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987, Robert Townsend) and *House Party* (1990, Reginald Hudlin) all achieved commercial success in the late 1980s, “the major film companies began to include African-American directed features as part of their product offering, mainly in the form of the low budget specialty film” (Watkins *Representing* 102). As in the 1970s, these low budget “specialty” films provided little economic risk and certain profits in an uncertain moviemaking climate.

During the height of the studio system “production strategies were predicated on social and cultural homogeneity, or more precisely, targeting a ‘mass’ and mostly undifferentiated audience.” But by the 1990s, “production strategies are predicated on social and cultural difference, which results in the targeting of specialized audiences” (Watkins *Representing* 80). Neal Gabler adds that unlike the early days of the cinema, when immigrant

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<sup>176</sup> The term “failure” is relative since blockbusters must garner an incredible box office in order to recoup their massive production costs.

filmmakers and studio heads wished to present an “idealized portrait of their new homeland,” “Today [in 1991] there is no longer a desire for a national cultural consensus, we’re now much more plurastic” (qtd. in Bates 18). Studios consequently began using market-segmentation, which divides the mass audience into identifiable segments and caters specifically to their presumed needs, a process which presupposes that the group being targeted is “identifiable, measurable, accessible, and substantial enough to generate profits” (Watkins *Representing* 100). In the 1970s and 1990s, marketing specialists identified a desirable portion of the film going audience, urban blacks in the former and black youth, and some segments of white youth,<sup>177</sup> in the latter, and determined that these audiences would attend theaters in order to see images of hyper violent or hyper sexualized black characters in urban settings.

Like the blaxploitation cycle, the success of the ghetto action cycle was grounded in its rejection of the conventional depictions of the black characters created in the preceding decade. Critics like Robin Wood and Donald Bogle have described the cinematic climate of the 1980s as reactionary and conservative, as a cinema of recuperation (Wood 162-163, Bogle 267-269). Throughout the 1980s there was a steady reduction of films with black-focused narratives or with black actors in lead roles, and in their place was a “disturbing resurfacing of images from Hollywood’s pre-civil rights past,” amounting to a “neominstrelsy” of sorts (Guerrero 22). Guerrero believes that studios, in their marketing of comedic actors like Eddie Murphy, Richard Pryor and Whoopi Goldberg, employed various “strategies of containment,” positioning them as “supreme icons and incarnations of the rootless, decultured individual in industrial consumer

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<sup>177</sup> In a 1991 letter to editor in *The New York Times*, Frank Price, who identifies himself as Chairman of Columbia Pictures, describes the audience targeted for *Boyz N the Hood*: “Our marketing campaign sought primarily to reach a young black audience... We also identified a secondary audience we believed would respond to *Boyz N the Hood*. Among them were (1) young white, primarily those who listen to music like that in the film; (2) older white and black, who would respond to the themes and the reviews we received” (A26).

society” (125). In other words, by placing these black characters in all white environments (see *Beverly Hills Cop* [1984, Eddie Murphy], *Jumpin’ Jack Flash* [1986, Penny Marshall], etc.) the black experience was depicted as devoid of a definable context or politics. When there was an attempt to portray some fragment of black life or culture it was primarily for comic purposes. Likewise, the overwhelming popularity of interracial buddy movies, like *Lethal Weapon* (1987, Richard Donner), *48 Hours* (1982, Walter Hill), and *Stir Crazy* (1980, Sidney Poitier), put the black filmic presence in “protective custody” of a white lead or co-star, who could then act as his/her “ideological chaperone” (Guerrero 128) within the white milieu of the film. These films imply that America’s racial conflicts, which had raged throughout the previous decades, were no longer an issue. In the 1980s, blacks and whites can now cooperate as partners tackling America’s *real* enemies: sadistic killers, drug smugglers and foreign terrorists.

Of course, as Donald Bogle points out, throughout Hollywood’s history audiences have enjoyed and embraced the pairing of biracial “buddies” like Shirley Temple and Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Bing Crosby and Louis Armstrong, and Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis, Jr., etc (271). In his discussion of the Temple/Robinson pairings in numerous films throughout the 1930s, James Snead writes that “we never see black families or significant relationships between black men and women. Blacks are not here for themselves, clearly, but mainly for others, and more precisely, *for whites*” (58). In films like *The Little Colonel* (1935, David Butler) or *The Littlest Rebel* (1935, David Butler), black characters exist mainly to aid Temple in overcoming the various crises which threaten the stability of her family. The viewer is never privy to the status of these characters’ personal lives because they are often appear in isolation, without family or community. This same situation is reestablished in the 1980s. Thus, David Walker argues that the success of *She’s Gotta Have It*, a film set in an urban milieu

featuring a wide range of black characters, proved that audiences were tired of the contemporary depiction of black movie characters and “were hungry for something other than the Eddie Murphy and Whoopie Goldberg [*sic*] stuff that was being forced upon us” (qtd. in Martinez 61). By the early 1990s, there was a “frenzy for black product,” an environment which allowed John Singleton, who had no previous professional credits (other than some prestigious screenwriting awards), to direct a \$6 million dollar picture about black youth (*Boyz N the Hood*).

Though the discourses surrounding both film cycles center on their representation of race and race relations, they function in slightly different ways in each decade. For example, Mark Reid convincingly argues that ad campaigns for early blaxploitation films like *Shaft* (1971, Gordon Parks), which were targeted at black audiences, exploited fantasies of empowerment by employing the rhetoric of the contemporary Black Power movement (83-84). MGM’s advertising campaign (launched by the firm UniWorld), emphasized Shaft’s anti- (white) establishment status and more importantly, the participation of a primarily black crew in all aspects of the film’s production, “thereby appealing to blacks who would appreciate the film as a black production or could fantasize that blacks had somehow beat the Hollywood system and taken over Metro-Goldwyn Mayer studios” (84). The initial exploitation of race in this film cycle had a particularly political valence in that marketers hoped black audiences would attend these movies because they offered a patina of revolutionary ideals, of “getting over” the establishment. Whether or not audiences truly “bought” into this packaging is more difficult to discern. Some black periodicals like *Jet* and *The New York Amsterdam News* expressed optimism over the opportunities that blaxploitation films could unlock for black actors, directors and other studio

personnel while *Ebony* found many of the films to be stereotypical and offensive.<sup>178</sup> Nevertheless, despite this mixed reception, for some segments of the audience (left-wing activists, the Black Panthers) these images initially held the promise of major changes in the popular representation of the black image in American film (Hartmann 400). As I will show, this revolutionary gloss begins to tarnish as the cycle ages, and blackness is marketed more as a distillation of 1970s fashion, of what is hip, rather than what is politically conscious. This change in the blaxploitation cycle's politics is also tied to the fact that by 1973 studios began to tone down the overt politics of the cycle in order to attract a "cross over" (i.e., white) audience.

By contrast, the exploitation of blackness in the 1990s ghetto action cycle was associated both with an alleged political consciousness *and* with an image of contemporaneity, hipness and youth culture. What is most interesting about the exploitation of these films—via posters, trailers, director interviews and press kits—is that it engages in a kind of double speak, with the directors' articulation of the purpose or meaning of their films being quite different from how studios chose to market this purpose or meaning to the audience. In the marketing of the ghetto action cycle, blackness as an image—of violence, masculinity, and urban cool—was erroneously conflated with the contemporary, real world experiences of *all* young, black urban males. This definition of blackness was central to the creation of this cycle and its consequent success since it played directly into the imagery which sold millions of rap albums to white suburban teens, the studios' target demographic in the early 1990s. Furthermore, black filmmakers were often given projects in the early 1990s because this particular, *violent*,

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<sup>178</sup> See Jon Hartmann's "The Trope of Blaxploitation in critical responses to *Sweetback*" for a detailed discussion of how contemporary periodicals initially reacted to blaxploitation.

definition of blackness became a lucrative commodity.<sup>179</sup> The marketing of this cycle also mirrored crime reporting narratives of the 1990s and exploited the emerging culture of fear in which race played a significant role.<sup>180</sup>

### 4.2.3 The Blaxploitation Cycle

While other scholars have recently completed extensive research on the reception of blaxploitation films in order to determine how the alleged political content of these films was understood and received by critics and audiences,<sup>181</sup> this chapter is more invested in determining how the trope of “blackness” itself was used as a selling tool and why. My focus will be on how studios chose to market “blackness” to its audiences and how these marketing techniques were further interpreted by the press. Likewise, I do not wish to analyze whether or not such images were truly “political,” revolutionary or inspiring for audiences; rather I want to determine if they were marketed to *appear* as political and revolutionary and what marketers hoped to achieve by taking such an approach. The obvious place to begin a discussion about how blackness was exploited in the blaxploitation film is with the text that is most frequently cited as originating the cycle: Melvin Van Peebles’ *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadassss Song*.

Melvin Van Peebles, the writer, director, producer and star of *Sweetback*, claims that after he made his film “*Time* magazine, *Newsweek*, *New York Times* refused to even review

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<sup>179</sup> S. Craig Watkins adds that in the early 1990s, “The menacing spectre of ghetto youth culture became *the* exploitative hook that made the production of this particular film cycle timely, sensational and oddly enough, more easily marketable” (*Genres* 238). See Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion of how signifiers of gangsta culture were successfully marketed to white middle class teenagers.

<sup>180</sup> See Chapters 1 and 3 for a more detailed discussion of the 1990s crime wave and the media’s reaction to it.

<sup>181</sup> See Jon Hartmann’s “The Trope of Blaxploitation in critical responses to *Sweetback*” (1994), Jon Kraszewski’s “Recontextualizing the Historical Reception of Blaxploitation: Articulations of Class, Black Nationalism and Anxiety in the Genre’s Advertisements” (2002) and Harry Benshoff’s “Blaxploitation Horror Films: Generic Reappropriation or Reinscription?” (2000).

the film...Since I can't count on these people, I don't have to pander to them. That was the start of this whole Black esthetic" (qtd. in Martinez 37). Van Peebles' statement, though made in hindsight (in 1998),<sup>182</sup> implies that his decision to market to the black audience came about almost as an afterthought; if his film had initially received more mainstream exposure then he might not have catered exclusively to the urban black community at all. Nevertheless, once identified, Van Peebles was extremely strategic with his exploitation of this particular demographic. In the tradition of great film exploiters like Oscar Micheaux, Kroger Babb, Sam Katzman, and Herschell Gordon Lewis, Van Peebles studied his market and then determined the best form of ballyhoo to employ in order to pull in his viewers. He recalls asking himself "How am I going to advertise the film if I don't have any money? Okay, Black people like music, I'll write a hit song...I had this whole marketing idea to use music to sell the movie" (qtd. in Martinez 37). Though Van Peebles (erroneously) credits himself with discovering that music could be used to sell films<sup>183</sup> he did initiate one primary convention of the blaxploitation cycle—the employment of a popular, contemporary R & B artist(s) to compose the film's soundtrack.<sup>184</sup> Ed Guerrero believes that Van Peebles' packaging of his film—which included the soundtrack as well as a book documenting Van Peebles' experiences making the film, entitled *The Making of Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*—is what kickstarted the practice of marketing Blaxploitation-related commodities (97).

Perhaps the most important vehicle for the exploitation of race in the promotion of *Sweetback* was its posters, which would have appeared in national newspapers and magazines

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<sup>182</sup> Note to reader: When I quote an interview with someone who discusses the blaxploitation cycle in the book, *What It Is...What It Was!: The Black Film Explosion of the '70s in Words and Pictures*, it is important to keep in mind that all of these interviews were conducted in the mid- to late 1990s.

<sup>183</sup> This marketing technique dates back to at least the 1950s with films like *Rock Around the Clock* (1956, Fred F. Sears).

<sup>184</sup> *Shaft* was scored by Isaac Hayes, *Superfly* was scored by Curtis Mayfield, *Black Caesar* (1973, Larry Cohen) was scored by James Brown, etc.

as well as the lobbies of downtown theaters. According to Jon Kraszewski, movie posters “frame” movies for spectators, thus acting not only as a lure, but also as a rubric for reading the film they are about to watch (50). The *Sweetback* poster features a close up of the protagonist’s face, partially obscured by shadows, against a black background (Martinez 33).<sup>185</sup> He looks directly at the viewer with a confrontational, but also somewhat detached expression. Below this image are a series of line drawings depicting mostly violent vignettes from the film: a white cop holding a gun to the face of a frightened black woman, another white cop releasing a pack of hunting dogs in a field, and Sweetback raising a hand-cuffed arm over his head in order to strike something that does not appear within the frame of the picture. Van Peebles’ defiant stare, coupled with images of police brutality and black empowerment, clearly tapped into the tropes of Black Nationalism which had a strong currency in the urban centers where the film was marketed.<sup>186</sup> This poster is constructed to appeal to the viewer’s sense of outrage over racial injustice. Most famously, Huey Newton, the minister of defense for the Black Panthers, described *Sweetback* as “required viewing” for the black community and offered a detailed analysis of the film in the Black Panther party’s newsletter, *The Black Panther* (Hartmann 389, Massood 94, Guerrero 87).<sup>187</sup> Here we can see how carefully selected images which connote one definition of blackness—persecution by the state, rebellion against racist institutions and aggressive masculinity—were used to draw contemporary black audiences into theaters.

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<sup>185</sup> Note to reader: The endnote citations in this section that appear after the mention of a blaxploitation film poster refer to the page in *What It Is... What It Was!: The Black Film Explosion of the '70s in Words and Pictures* where these posters have been reproduced.

<sup>186</sup> The poster also raised some hackles. Jon Hartmann describes how the feminist journal *Women’s Liberation* reprinted this poster a few months after the film’s release covered in graffiti-like comments such as “Fuck this racist bullshit.” (388).

<sup>187</sup> Newton, however, later changed his tune on the subject of blaxploitation films. In a July 1972 article in *Newsweek* Newton complains that these films “leave revolution out or, if it’s in, they make it look stupid and naïve. I think it’s part of a conspiracy” (qtd. in Michener 77).

If, as David F. Friedman claims, the exploitation picture is a film in which you “[saw] the show before you ever got into the theater” (qtd. in McCarty 58), then *Sweetback* certainly fits this definition. At the bottom of the aforementioned *Sweetback* poster are three images from the film coupled with three captions. The first still shows a black couple embracing and reads “You bled my momma”; the second is an image of a shirtless black man who being tortured by a white cop and the caption reads “You bled my poppa”; and the third still shows the screaming face of a black man in the foreground and white woman in the background, accompanied by the words “But you won’t bleed me.” These image and word combinations imply that the establishment has “bled” or persecuted the mothers and fathers of the black community in general and the film’s protagonist in particular. As a result of these injustices, the protagonist is going to strike back (“But you won’t bleed me”). However, the characters featured in the first two stills are *not* images of the protagonists’ mother or father—the film opens by telling us that Sweetback is an orphan raised by a brothel of prostitutes. It could, of course, be argued that the characters in the first two stills are to be read as Sweetback’s metaphorical parents, that is, as older members of the black community who are being mistreated by the establishment and who deserve the viewer’s outrage and sympathy. But again this is not the case. The woman in the first picture is a nameless, minor character from the film—a prostitute—who was not subjected to any specific form of violence from the state. And the man in the second still is Beetle (Simon Chuckster), the proprietor of the brothel where Sweetback works and who initiates Sweetback’s problems with the police by agreeing to give him up as a patsy. While the interrogation scene pictured in the poster, in which Beetle’s eardrums are shattered by a close range gun blast, certainly generates sympathy for him as well as hostility against his racist interrogators, within the film Beetle is nevertheless portrayed as one of Sweetback’s antagonists

and *not* a major motivation for his eventual conversion to a militant point of view. In fact, Beetle comes across as a fairly detestable character throughout the film, so that within the narrative this cruel treatment appears as the logical result of having given Sweetback up to the police; Beetle deserves what he gets. This advertising strategy nonetheless acts as effective ballyhoo, even if it bears little relation to the film's narrative. Van Peebles "relied...on sensational ploys to ethnic and socio-political fears and fashions" (Hartmann 384) in order to draw in his target audience.

Van Peebles' contemporary interviews in mainstream publications like *Newsweek* and *Time*, and black-targeted publications like *Jet*, likewise emphasize his attempts to exploit racial politics. In his in-depth analysis of *Sweetback's* reception in the media, John Hartmann found that these periodicals "were most easily hypnotized by Van Peebles' claims" and were "reluctant to do more than let Van Peebles' well-rehearsed promotions speak for themselves" (397). For example, in a 1971 *Time* magazine interview Van Peebles proclaimed "Of all the ways we've been exploited by the Man, the most damaging is the way he destroyed our self-image. The message of *Sweetback* is that if you can get it together and stand up to the Man, you can win" ("Power to the Peebles"). Here Van Peebles is portrayed as a rogue artist who took on the film industry and won. The interview also paints him as a hip revolutionary who, like the character he plays in *Sweetback*, is nonplussed by the struggles he had to endure in order to get his film on screen: "Van Peebles is a cool dude, casting a cynical eye on the world from behind his silver shades...He may be content to work inside the system, but the system had better bend a bit to accommodate him" ("Power to the Peebles").<sup>188</sup> And in a *Life* magazine interview he claimed to have made America's "first black revolutionary film" (qtd. in Guerrero 88). By contrast, many Black-targeted newspapers, like *The New York Amsterdam News* and the

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<sup>188</sup> In another interview in an unidentified source, Van Peebles explained "I made this film for the black aesthetic. White critics aren't used to that. This movie is black life, unpandered" (qtd. in Bennett 112).

*Michigan Chronicle*, expressed some discomfort with the film's exploitation of the black community's political interests, but were nevertheless pleased that an independent feature written, directed and produced by a black entrepreneur was a commercial success (Hartmann 393-394).

While the major backlash from the black community would not emerge full force until the release of *Superfly* (Gordon Parks, Jr.) in August of 1972 (Guerrero 100), a handful of black critics were initially critical of *Sweetback's* message and its apparent exploitation of black imagery and/or the black community. *Ebony* writer Lerone Bennett was particularly outraged by the film. His 1971 essay, "The Emancipation Orgasm: Sweetback in Wonderland," argued that the film lent itself to "image confusion" in that it romanticized images of poverty, urban misery and criminality rather than "probing deep into the root causes of poverty" (108). Bennett was especially concerned about *Sweetback's* dual status as a stepping stone *and* a step backwards for black cinema:

...it is an obligatory step for anyone who wants to go further and make the first black revolutionary film. This is a judgment one wishes that he did not have to make, but it is a judgment that one must make not only because *Sweet Sweetback's* success seems likely to lead to a number of imitative Sons of Sweetback but also because many blacks are suffering under the illusion that the film is revolutionary and black. (112)

Bennett's essay expressed a passion for the possibilities of contemporary black cinema, for representations that were not a reiteration of white stereotypes nor a simple reversal. Although in press interviews Van Peebles' claimed that *Sweetback* was precisely this type of film, Bennett remained unconvinced, explaining that: "in the final analysis, [Van Peebles] won or escaped, not

on his own terms but on the man's terms...And the white man, who will market anything that entertains and sells, is going to imitate him, for his formula sex-violence-degradation, liberally garnished with words like Ass and Motherf\*\*\*er [sic], is by no means new or revolutionary” (116). In Bennett's estimation, the spectacle of a black character who was strong, attractive and sexually dominant acted as a smokescreen to distract audiences from the film's absent politics.

*The New York Times* straddled both sides of the *Sweetback* debate (i.e., that it is a landmark for black cinema as well as riddled with offensive stereotypes) by printing two reviews of the film, one by a white reviewer, Vincent Canby, and one by a black reviewer, Clayton Riley. Canby found Van Peebles' exploitation of blackness to be blatant and crude “With the exception of perhaps a dozen scenes, the movie is composed almost entirely of the sort of fancy montages with which television sells its cigarettes, beer, automobile tires and scented feminine hygiene sprays” (D1). By contrast, Riley reiterated the rhetoric of the mainstream press when he wrote that “[*Sweetback*] is a vision Black people alone will really understand in all of its profane and abrasive substance” (D11).<sup>189</sup> *The New York Times* also printed several “letters to the editor” from readers who had similarly mixed reactions to *Sweetback*. Paul E. Hamilton, who identifies himself as “a young black man,” objects to Canby's dismissal of *Sweetback* as compared with his positive review of *Shaft* a few months later “A ‘superspade’ vitalization of a tired white role certainly poses less of a threat to the complacency of mainstream America than a positive portrayal of a black victim of white society who violently strikes back at his oppressors” (D25). Loye Hairston, who does not indicate his race within his letter, complains that “Rarely have I seen such rubbish hustled as a film of *relevant social commentary*...Obviously the death notices

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<sup>189</sup> This “double review” from *The New York Times* was the only press clipping included in *Sweetback*'s studio issued press kit. It appears that Van Peebles and Cinemation exploited this conflicted response to the film as part of its promotional campaign. This tactic seems to imply that if the *New York Times*, one of the most well-respected sources for film reviews, took the time to publish not one but *two* reviews of the film, then it must be worth seeing.

of the nigger-stereotype were terribly premature for he is alive and well” (D14). Finally, Marshall Hill, who describes himself as young, black, “light-skinned,” middle class and well-educated, complains “It was bad enough when the white man insisted on presenting us in this light [as pimps, prostitutes and dope addicts]. Now the black man is exploiting his own people” (SM38).

Despite these negative reactions from a handful of black publications, critics and viewers, it appears that the discourses circulating around *Sweetback* in the publications most likely to be read by the film’s target audience (in *Jet*, certain black newspapers, and the mainstream press) helped to further exploit the film’s perceived “blackness” by presenting one of two narratives. In the first narrative *Sweetback* portrays an “authentic” portrait of contemporary black life and provides a much-needed (if at times problematic) political commentary on the black experience in America (i.e., Clayton Riley’s perspective). The second narrative ignores a discussion of the themes and politics espoused within the actual film to focus instead on *Sweetback*’s status as a black film produced by and for the black community, a marketing technique which, as I mentioned, is later appropriated in MGM’s promotion of *Shaft* (i.e., *Jet*’s perspective). Both narratives rely upon an image of blackness, whether within the text itself or outside of it, in order to sell the film. *Sweetback*’s careful exploitation of blackness (in addition to the aforementioned economic and political conditions of the early 1970s) served as the catalyst for a cycle which would continue to be nurtured on these same images.

William Crain’s *Blacula* (1972) is another useful text to study in this regard because it was released around the same time that the term “blaxploitation” first began circulating through the mainstream press as well as the popular imagination. Although many critics immediately decried what they saw as the exploitation of black audiences upon the release

of *Sweetback* in 1971, the term “blaxploitation” is most frequently attributed to Junius Griffin, then head of the Hollywood chapter of the NAACP, and later, the founder (along with Roy Innis) of the Coalition Against Blaxploitation (CAB). In an August 16, 1972 *Variety* article Griffin denounced what he described as “Black exploitation films” (Martinez 54). Then, on August 18, 1972, the term “blaxploitation” appeared in a *Newsweek* article, entitled “Blacks vs. Shaft” about the formation of the Coalition Against Blaxploitation, officially putting the term on the cultural map (88). Therefore when *Blacula* arrived on the scene on August 25, 1972, in the wake of successful and controversial films like *Sweetback* and *Shaft*, it would have been understood, not merely as a horror film starring a black actor, but also as a film seeking to exploit the black audience (if not as a “blaxploitation” film). Indeed, *Blacula* was singled out by the newly formed CAB for placing its black actors in demeaning roles (Benshoff 34).

An examination of the film’s advertising strategies reveals that *Blacula* uses its status as a black film as its primary form of exploitation, over and above its status as a horror film. This is a significant choice since the horror film has traditionally been a genre amenable to exploitation. For example, exploiteer Herschell Gordon Lewis defines the exploitation film as “a motion picture in which the elements of plot and acting become subordinate to elements that can be *promoted*” (qtd. in McCarty 38). For Lewis such elements are those “the promoter can grab onto and shake in the face of theater owners to get them to play the picture and in the face of the public to get them to see it,” like “dinosaurs eating people and chomping off arms” (qtd. in McCarty 39). So while every producer must “exploit” some aspect of his/her film in order to get people to see it (whether that be the presence of an Academy Award winning actress, a film’s “indie” credibility, etc.), it appears that exploitation films are those promoting aspects of the film that generate a strong sensation or affect in the viewer, such as horror, fear, indignation, disgust,

arousal, sadness, etc. Most classic Hollywood horror films, like *Dracula* (1931, Tod Browning) (“The story of the strangest passion the world has ever known!”) and *Frankenstein* (1931, James Whale) (“A monster science created—but could not destroy!”), were promoted in a similar fashion to exploitation films. The ballyhoo for these films centered on the film’s most sensational aspects, that is, on the titular monster’s potential danger to society: Dracula sucks his victim’s blood and Frankenstein’s monster threatens peaceful villages with his unnatural body. However, *Blacula*’s ballyhoo was centered primarily on the *blackness* of its monster—around Blacula’s status as both a black man as well as a black version of the European Dracula.

Harry Benshoff points out that while the classic American horror film is typically predicated on the oscillation between the “normal,” traditionally represented by white, middle-class heterosexuals, and the “monstrous” Other, frequently signified by racial, sexual or class markers, blaxploitation horror films tended to refigure the horror genre’s accepted conventions of normality and monstrosity (31). In the case of *Blacula*, the film is less about a monstrous Other who terrorizes the “normal” population than it is about a black man who has been terrorized *by* the racist white establishment. For instance, the film opens with the African prince Mamuwalde (William Marshall) and his bride, Luva (Vonetta McGee), visiting the castle of Count Dracula (Charles Macaulay) in eighteenth century Transylvania in order to enlist the Count’s support to oppose the then-burgeoning slave trade in Africa. Rather than help the couple, the Count explains that he would like Luva as his personal (sex) slave and then proceeds to “enslave” Mamuwalde by cursing him with his vampire’s bite. So while Mamuwalde, who is renamed “Blacula” by the Count, is certainly the film’s monster, the narrative makes it clear that he is also the film’s primary victim, a product of white persecution. The scene in which

Mamuwalde is placed into a coffin where he can hear the screams of his dying bride “for eternity,” generates sympathy for, rather than terror of, the vampire.

The tagline on one of the film’s promotional posters highlights Blacula’s dual nature as victim/monster: “Rising From the Echoing Corridors of Hell, An Awesome Being of the Supernatural—With Satanic Power of Sheer Dread. Chained Forever to a Slavery More Vile Than Any Before Endured...” (Martinez 44). Much like *Sweetback*’s promotional techniques (“You bled my momma, you bled my poppa, but you won’t bleed me”), *Blacula*’s ballyhoo positions its protagonist as justified in his retaliation against a racist society. The taglines on some of the film’s other posters likewise root its primary appeal in the black identity of the protagonist. One reads “He’s black! He’s beautiful! He’s Blacula!” thus bending the well-known slogan of the Black Power movement (“Black is beautiful”) to the needs of the film’s promotion; indeed, very few movie monsters are described in advertising as being beautiful. Another tagline boasts that Blacula is “Deadlier than Dracula!” (“Blacula”). Again, such an advertising strategy, which claims that Blacula is more powerful than his white predecessor, was meant to appeal to what the film industry had identified as an increasingly militant black audience, the antidote to the audience’s dissatisfaction with the screen image of the “ebony saint” (Guerrero 72) typified by black stars like Sidney Poitier. In this way, Blacula is positioned, not just as a typical movie monster, but as a potential revolutionary. Hence, “unlike most Hollywood horror films of previous eras, audience sympathy is often redirected away from [“normality,” represented by the middle class, heterosexuality and white figures of authority] and toward the figure of the monster, a specifically black *avenger* who justifiably fights against the dominant order—which is often explicitly coded as racist” (Benshoff 37).

As with *Sweetback*, some of the posters for *Blacula* misrepresented the film's narrative events in order to promote a Black Nationalist vision that does not necessarily surface in the film proper. In one of the film's original theatrical posters there is a large image of Blacula with a stake through his heart (an event which *did* occur in the film) but the smaller, inset image is of Blacula biting into the neck of an agonized, scantily clad white woman (a similar, larger version of this image was also used in the film's non-U.S. posters) (Martinez 41). However this event, the attack on a white woman (clothed or otherwise), never occurs in the film. This image was employed because it invoked some of the (more controversial) discourses of Black Nationalism. Black Nationalism attempted to "subvert" nineteenth century rape narratives which positioned black males as hypersexual threats to white womanhood, by embracing this image and "advocating black male sexuality as a source of political power. J Eldridge Cleaver, for example, claimed a black man raping a white woman was an act of political empowerment" (Kraszewski 57).<sup>190</sup> Thus the image of Mamuwalde grasping the bare neck of an imperiled white woman in order to deliver an intimate, highly sexualized bite, articulates Mamuwalde as a figure of black nationalism (Kraszewski 59).<sup>191</sup> I would add that American International Pictures (the film's distributor) was also evoking the now conventionalized blaxploitation trope, established in films like *Sweetback* and *Shaft*, among others, of the having a black male protagonist sleep with a white woman in order to show the extent of his sexual prowess as well as his modern views on interracial relationships. Of course, this imagery also panders to old stereotypes and anxieties about black male sexuality, namely that to bed a white woman is the goal of any heterosexual

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<sup>190</sup> Jon Kraszewski points out that several blaxploitation films, including *Slaughter* (1972, Jack Starrett) and *Truck Turner* (1974, Jonathan Kaplan), also use images of the film's heroes embracing or being touched by scantily clad white women as part of their advertising strategies (57).

<sup>191</sup> William Marshall claims that while he was not surprised that the studio chose to promote the film in this way, he "wasn't ready for a sensationalized image of Black-on-white lust to advertise *Blacula*" (qtd. in Martinez 42).

black man. So while *Blacula* lacked this narrative event (*Blacula* does not engage in any sexual activity in the film, even though he does find love), the inclusion of this image positioned *Blacula* as politically engaged, sexually powerful and contemporary. Indeed, trailers for the film as well as radio spots labeled him as “the black avenger” and as “Dracula’s soul brother.”

In an effort to exploit the two hooks which would have drawn in a black audience (horror and blackness), *Blacula*’s trailer offers a mix of traditional horror film elements<sup>192</sup> with signifiers of the blaxploitation film. One trailer opens with a shot of Dracula’s castle at night and then cuts to *Blacula* about to receive a bite from the Count. However, the audience is cued that this is not a conventional horror movie attack, but rather a *racial* attack, when Dracula utters “I curse you with my name, you shall be...Blacula!” Not only is the protagonist being persecuted by a white figure of considerable power, he is being renamed with a moniker that makes his racial identity primary (and which positions him as *derivative* of the white persecutor who is claiming power over him). And of course, by taking away Mamuwalde’s African name and replacing it with the name of his white “master,” the film presents the audience with the most unconscionable offense of all, the enslavement of a free African man. The nondiegetic music then transitions from that of a horror film to the recognizable funk synthesizer score of the blaxploitation movie.<sup>193</sup> This music allows for a montage of images which are less

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<sup>192</sup> The film’s posters do not ignore the fact that *Blacula* is also a horror film, a genre which had always served A.I.P. well. Harry Benshoff points out that black moviegoers have been historically understood to constitute a substantial part of the horror genre’s audience (32) and so studios would have made an effort, when promoting *Blacula*, to also highlight its status as a horror film. For example, one of the film’s posters features nothing more than a large image of *Blacula*’s menacing face and a smaller image of three zombie-like women. Next to the women’s faces is a small pink box with an endorsement from the Count Dracula Society: “‘Blacula’ is the most horrifying film of the decade” (Martinez 44). The Academy of Horror Films and Science Fiction films also named *Blacula* the “Best Horror Film of 1972.” Of course this praise of the film’s horrific elements must be taken with a grain of salt since, according to the latter’s official website “The Academy became a reality in 1972. We were born out of another group headed by Founder Dr. Donald A. Reed, THE COUNT DRACULA SOCIETY.” In other words, these two honors extend from the same body of voters.

<sup>193</sup> Amanda Howell explains that in the 1970s funk music was a signifier of blaxploitation films, a “multivalent signifier for mobile, urban blackness” and that it was never “encouraged to cross over in the same way—or at least

conventionally “horrific” and more indicative of the blaxploitation film’s action sequences—for example, we see various shots from a prolonged sequence in which two cops battle a group of vampires (gun fights, tossed Molotov cocktails, etc). The next shot features one of the film’s few special effects (Blacula transforms from a man into a bat), accompanied by a more traditional horror soundtrack. But these signifiers of the horror film are again countered by a shot in which a character standing outside of a nightclub utters, “You know he [Blacula] *is* a straaaaaange dude!”<sup>194</sup> The man wears with a wide-collared polyester shirt, once again linking the film up with the contemporary experiences (i.e., fashion and dialect) of the black community. William Marshall recalls that this trailer resonated with urban audiences: “In many theaters throughout the United States when the trailers were shown, the audiences were so wild about the trailers they couldn’t stop applauding through the opening of the next feature. The trailers became so popular that people were coming to the theater just to see them” (qtd. in Martinez 42). While Marshall’s remarks may be apocryphal, the trailer’s deft exploitation of both horror film conventions and blaxploitation imagery reveals how important the latter was in the marketing and early success of the blaxploitation cycle.

Much as blaxploitation horror films exploited their two main hooks, horror and blackness, blaxploitation films starring female leads similarly centered their promotional campaigns on their heroine’s sexuality as well as their blackness, often making one consonant with the other. *Coffy* (1973 Jack Hill), the first blaxploitation film built around the activities of a female protagonist (it was released one month before *Cleopatra Jones* [1973, Jack Starrett]),

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to the same degree—as soul or disco.” She adds that “funk’s musical character underpinned what would become the set pieces of blaxploitation...and made them into audio-visual representations expressive of the mobility and freedom of its protagonists to act decisively in their urban environments.”

<sup>194</sup> This particular line was especially popular among fans. In his interview in *What it is... What it Was*, William Marshall recalls asking a young fan “Who do you think I am?”: “He said, quoting from the night club scene, ‘You know, you’re the Strange Dude.’” (qtd. in Martinez 40).

made copious use of Pam Grier's "assets." The poster for *Coffy* features the heroine dressed in a bikini top and tight leather pants with a stout shot gun balanced on one hip. Below this image are several vignettes from the film: Coffy strangling a prostitute, Coffy pointing a shotgun at a man's face, and, of course, Coffy in lingerie. These images represent the different advertising hooks being employed by the studio. On the one hand Coffy is a revolutionary fighting the establishment. As with *Blacula*, the poster's tagline both compares and asserts her dominance over her white filmic predecessors: "She's the 'GODMOTHER' of them all...The baddest One-Chick Hit-Squad that ever hit town!" (Martinez 52). Filmgoers are promised a black female character who can "out bad" even Vito Corleone (Marlon Brando), an outlaw figure who captivated black audiences only one year before.<sup>195</sup> But Pam Grier's sexuality is also foregrounded as a major element of the film (which it is) and this hypersexualization is bound up with the image of her blackness. For example, American International Picture's press kit offered exhibitors three different posters and promotional campaigns to choose from. The first poster, which is labeled "Black Coffy," features the heroine in the aforementioned "revolutionary" outfit, including Afro and rifle but also a bra and skintight pants. Her head is cocked slightly upwards and to the left in a challenge to the viewer. The second poster, "Hot Coffy," is an image of Grier looking coyly over shoulder at the viewer and unzipping her dress. Her Afro has been replaced with a head of soft curls. The third, "Sweet Coffy," features Grier lying in a bed dressed in revealing lingerie and a "come hither" stare. But what to make of these contrasting images (which, in some posters, were combined into one multi-faceted image)?

The significance and meaning of such images for the black community was even more fraught than the tangled meanings surrounding the hypersexualized images of male

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<sup>195</sup> It was estimated that 35% of the audience for *The Godfather* (1972, Francis Ford Coppola) was black (Guerrero 103).

“Sweetbacks” which dominated the first two years of the blaxploitation cycle. In other words, images of female empowerment and agency would have run counter to the studios’ attempts to appeal to the black audience via the tropes of Black Nationalism since, at this time, “both conservative Christian pundits *and* radical black militants often cited strong black women (and effeminate or gay black men) as something that was ‘wrong’ with black culture” (Benshoff 41). In her autobiographical account of her career as a writer and critic, *Invisibility Blues*, Michele Wallace recalls her own rude awakening to the politics of the Black Power movement: “It took me three years to fully understand that Stokely [Carmichael] was serious when he’d said my position in the movement was ‘prone,’ three years to understand that the countless speeches that all began ‘the black man...’ did not include me” (19).<sup>196</sup> And in her account of her experiences with the Black Power movement, Elaine Brown explains:

A woman in the Black Power movement was considered, at best, irrelevant. A woman asserting herself was a pariah. A woman attempting the role of leadership was, to my proud black Brothers, making an alliance with the “counter-revolutionary, man-hating, lesbian, feminist white bitches”...If a black woman assumed a role of leadership, she was said to be eroding black manhood, to be hindering the progress of the black race. She was an enemy of black people. (357)

As Brown points out there was a generalized feeling that the women’s liberation movement was a “white middle class thing,” whereas black women had larger social inequalities to address first: racism in America. Although black women desired equal pay and equal privileges, there was a

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<sup>196</sup> Stokely Carmichael was once quoted as saying “The only position for women in SNCC is prone.” While the most popular story surrounding this quote is that Carmichael said this when the issue of sexism was raised during a 1964 Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee conference, a 1998 NPR interview clarified that Carmichael made the comment “as a joke” while having drinks with friends (Hurst).

general sense that any success in the women's liberation movement would be useless if racial equality was not achieved first (King "The Black Woman" 75).

For example, a March 1971 article in *Ebony* magazine (a publication which Ed Guerrero has called "the principal organ of the black bourgeoisie" [74]), entitled "The Black Woman and Women's Lib," generated a spate of letters to the editor from the magazine's female readers—both for and against the movement. In the May 1971 "Letters" section Marie Harris wrote "I think Women's Lib is just another step in castrating our men by putting the Queen of Spades in position to beat the King of Spades. How can the black woman feel that she's free if her man isn't?" (20), while another woman worried that "If we would join Women's Lib, there would be a chance for the white women to get next to our black men" (Bryant 20). Many women who wrote in to *Ebony* viewed the women's lib movement as an attempt, on the part of white women, to control the actions and political activity of black women As one reader put it:

It is no wonder...that whites are trying to control us again, only this time using the Women's Liberation movement as a front. How can we fight for recognition as women when we are seldom recognized as equal human beings? Black women have no place in this undermining organization...Our future can be meaningfully enriched and strengthened by supporting our men now when they need us most. (Cushnie 23)

The argument against joining the women's liberation movement appears to be that if black women channel their political energy into women's causes then they might be compromising the strength of the black liberation movement and/or their relationships with black men. The *Ebony* piece also quoted a writer and university instructor, Carolyn Rodgers, who expressed the belief that black women have, historically, always been strong and liberated and so they had little need

for a “liberation” movement: “White women who are housewives have been allowed to remain girls, while the black ‘girl’ taking care of the house was indeed the woman...White women, with their private schools and summer camps and nursemaids for their children, and mechanical kitchens, want some satisfaction in being in a woman” (qtd. in King “The Black Woman” 75). Given that this belief was prominent among the politicized, black population at the time, it makes sense that studios attempting to capture this audience would temper the empowered image of blaxploitation heroines with a softer, more stereotypically feminine side. Benschhoff adds that another reason why blaxploitation images might not have been particularly appealing to black women in the early 1970s is that, at least amongst the middle class, there was a desire to “assimilate into traditional (i.e., passive and cosmeticized) models of Western femininity” (41). The aggressive, castrating images found in films like *Coffy* would have been the polar opposite of female passivity and domesticity.

Yet, even as these sentiments circulated among some members of the black community, the studios’ impulse to create blaxploitation films starring strong, proactive female leads, such as *Foxy Brown*, *Sheba Baby* (1975, William Girdler), *Friday Foster* (1975, Arthur Marks), *TNT Jackson* (1975, Cirio H. Santiago) and *Velvet Smooth* (1976, Michael L. Fink), among others, was a result of a critical backlash, by black and white critics alike, against the male-dominated, often anti-female, narratives of earlier blaxploitation fare (Benschhoff 41).<sup>197</sup> Many black women, like their white counterparts, chafed against passive, sexually available stereotypes of women. And many black women supporting the woman’s liberation movement saw the movement as going hand in hand with black liberation (King “The Black Woman” 74).

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<sup>197</sup> In a 1998 interview Pam Grier recalls that such images were necessary because the early 1970s were “a time of freedom and women saying that they needed empowerment...All across the country, a lot of women were Foxy Brown and Coffy. They were independent, fighting to save their families, not accepting rape or being victimized” (qtd. in Martinez 53).

For example, in response to the aforementioned *Ebony* article, a handful of female readers voiced their support for the women's liberation movement. Mary Kenyatta's letter in May 1971 is illustrative of this position: "The new "role" being propagated for us as black women is that of submission, obedience and remaining in the background. We are told that we have to make up for our complicity in castrating the black man...It is not enough that black men be free—black women cannot afford to wait till "after the revolution" to deal with our oppression as women" (20).

So clearly there were also black female viewers who would have enjoyed and embraced a heroine like Coffy. In order to satisfy these oppositional perspectives on the proper role of black women in contemporary society, American International Pictures made sure to couch its aggressive, proactive images of Coffy's militancy in passive, sexual terms. Thus posters which emphasized the "Black Coffy" persona (i.e, the strong, politically engaged Coffy), also made sure to include a small, inset image of "Sweet Coffy" (i.e., the submissive, sexually available Coffy), as if to assure the viewers that this strong action hero still knew how to "act like a woman." These posters reflect the film narrative's own strategies of containment and its attempts to appeal to a wide swath of audience. These heroines were "equally appealing to women who waffle between liberation and the maintenance of subservient roles" (Reid 88). For example, Coffy is only able to infiltrate the inner circle of criminal kingpin Arturo Vitroni (Allan Arbus) by posing as a prostitute, a plot point which necessitates filming Grier in various stages of undress. And while Coffy, like her male blaxploitation counterparts, does use her physical strength and mental cunning to defeat some of her enemies, she more often than not conquers her male opponents via seduction. Once the men are momentarily entranced by the sight of her bare breasts, Coffy is able to pull out her gun and finish the job.

The film's trailer, like its promotional posters, provides two contrasting images of female "blackness" as points of identification for the audience, oscillating between "Black Coffy" and "Sweet Coffy"/ "Hot Coffy." The trailer contains numerous shots of Grier wielding a large shotgun and cornering her adversaries, or tossing female attackers around. These sequences are always accompanied by a beat-heavy, bass and horn soundtrack, further aligning *Coffy* with action-packed blaxploitation films like *Shaft* and *Superfly*. In one shot a disheveled, overweight black man stares down the barrel of Coffy's gun as his pants slowly fall down around his ankles. Coffy explains "This is the end of your life you rotten dope pusher!" This image is clearly an emasculating one—Coffy wields the giant phallus while her male target is literally caught with his pants down. This image, in the context of the raging debates between feminist and Black Nationalist concerns, would have been polarizing at the time of the film's release and so it is almost immediately countered with Coffy in a more passive scene of seduction. As I mentioned, these scenes of "seduction" are usually Coffy's primary way of ensnaring the men she will eventually kill, but the trailer edits these moments in such a way that the double meanings of these sexual overtures (i.e., that they are ultimately deadly for Coffy's male opponents) are obscured. For example, in one shot Coffy sits in the backseat of a car between two white men. She touches the leg of the man to her right and purrs, "When I think of all the fun I could've had with a good-lookin' stud like you." "You really mean that?" he asks. After this exchange the film cuts to another action sequence. What we do not see is that these men have been sent to kill Coffy and by convincing one of them to sleep with her before he does the deed, she is able to kill him (with a strategically placed bobby pin) and escape. These images were also clearly intended to attract white (male) viewers by exploiting the sexual mythology of the black woman as "wild" and insatiable. The trailer includes a brief clip from a scene in which Coffy seduces Vitroni, who

is white and small in stature. As her hand inches along his crotch she asks “Are you sure you’re not just a *little* black?” This segment plays into white male anxieties about the presumed sexual potency (and penis size) of black men.

Throughout the film white characters discuss Coffy’s sexuality in terms of her perceived “exotic” blackness. After Coffy emerges victorious from a bloody catfight with a group of prostitutes, Vitroni exclaims “She’s like a wild animal! I’ve *got* to have that girl tonight!” While this remark is intended to paint Vitroni as a racist (later on he calls Coffy a “dirty nigger”) and to incite audience anger against the film’s primary villain, his sentiments are, strangely, echoed by the film’s musical soundtrack. In films like *Sweetback*, *Shaft* and *Superfly*, the musical soundtrack serves as the protagonist’s Greek chorus: lauding his sexual prowess in *Shaft* (“Who’s the black private dick /That’s a sex machine to all the chicks?/SHAFT! Ya damn right”), encouraging him in his endeavors in *Sweetback* (“Come on feet, do your thing”) or, in the case of *Superfly*, criticizing his life choices (“Feed me money for [style]/ And I’ll let you trip for a while/Insecure from the past/ How long can a good thing last?”). But in all cases this music is intended as the *vox humana* in the film, cuing the audience as to how they should interpret the film’s images. Amanda Howell argues that the musical soundtrack to *Sweetback* actually inverts the relation between music and image in classical Hollywood film: “the music of *Sweetback* largely dominates the visual aspects of the narrative, rather than supporting them, and is a key element in creating the film’s diegesis.” This is the case for the majority of blaxploitation films; at various moments in the film the musical soundtrack is foregrounded, illustrating or illuminating what we see in the image. Therefore, when the song in this scene describes Coffy as a “wild cat from a tropical jungle” moments after Vitroni, our racist villain, has described her as

a “wild animal,” we might wonder: whose *vox humana* is being voiced here? Would black viewers, particularly black women, have embraced this offensive, jungle metaphor?

This change in the film’s musical soundtrack, from one that supports the blaxploitation protagonist to one that supports racist stereotypes, may have something to do with a change in the blaxploitation cycle’s target audience. By 1973, the year of *Coffy*’s release, most studios realized that they did not need to cater exclusively to black viewers in order to lure them into downtown movie theaters. After a series of box office failures throughout the late 1960s, studios once again found blockbuster gold with *The Godfather* (1972, Francis Ford Coppola) and *The Exorcist* (1973, William Friedkin), films which garnered a huge following from black audiences (Guerrero 105). Furthermore, black-focused films which did not showcase militant black heroes combating The Man, such as *Sounder* (1972, Martin Ritt), were able to draw in the same black audiences while simultaneously bringing in the white audiences who found these “cross over” films to be less threatening: “Thus, Hollywood reasoned, if it could market films that would capture the lucrative black audience and at the same time attract whites, it could shift from making Blaxploitation films, which were coming under increasing criticism anyway, and possibly double its earnings at the box office” (Guerrero 105). *Coffy* reflects this shift. First, the film’s villains are not solely white; Coffy expends numerous bullets on the black pushers in her neighborhood responsible for hooking the black community on heroine. Likewise, while Vitroni is Coffy’s ultimate target, we find out at the film’s climax that her politician boyfriend, Howard Brunswick (Booker Bradshaw), is also a villain. Brunswick had only been posing as an advocate of the black cause, when he, in truth, just exploiting the black community’s commitment to political change. He is taking bribes from Vitroni and callously orders Coffy’s execution when she meddles too far into their business, explaining that “I’m in [politics] for the money, not the

solidarity.” A film like *Coffy* would have appealed to a “crossover” audience since it does not locate the villain in one specific race, but rather in a generally corrupt world.

Howard’s decision to parlay the political hopes of his militant black constituents into a way to line his own pockets can be read as an allegory of how the blaxploitation cycle used contemporary signifiers of blackness—revolutionary ideals, strong heroes, urban fashions—in order to revive failing studios. Like the creators of the blaxploitation cycle, Howard defends the exploitation of his “brothers and sisters,” claiming that he needed to accumulate some money and power before he could enact any real change in the black community (or, in the case of blaxploitation filmmakers, before they could make socially conscious films). While it can be argued that blaxploitation films were important because they provided an antidote to the sanitized (Sidney Poitier) or stereotyped (Amos n’ Andy) images of blackness that had been previously circulating in film, television and news media, many blaxploitation films merely embraced countercultural aesthetics as a mask for the conservative ideologies that lay at their core. Furthermore, while film historians like Eric Schaefer have described the classical exploitation film as a realm in which filmmakers, free of studio constraints, could express more marginal beliefs and ideals, Josh Strenger notes that by the 1960s, exploitation studios like American International Pictures were making a bid for the mainstream, seeking “narrative and ideological conciliation” with competing studios as well as with the audience (7). In the absence of quality production values or big name stars or directors, A.I.P.’s films exploited “prevailing attitudes about sex roles, whiteness and racial difference” (8) and wrapped “mainstream values in an edgy subcultural appeal” (6). Thus a film like *Coffy*, released in the midst of various competing attitudes about what a black woman “should” be, provided viewers of all races, sexes and political orientations with various prototypes: a tough, no-nonsense crime fighter, a

submissive lover, a wild “jungle cat,” etc. Blackness in these films was an image that could be manufactured and sold, first to the black audience, and soon after, to the white audience. For example, Guerrero relates how, after the release of *Shaft* the market was flooded with “Shaft” decals, suits, watches, leather jackets, beach towels and aftershave, all of which sold well in the urban black community (97). Blackness became a literal commodity that could be purchased and worn.

Despite the camp value that the blaxploitation now holds for contemporary viewers, at the time of their release blaxploitation films were initially marketed to an urban black audience as “authentic” slices of black culture, specifically, a *politically engaged* black culture.<sup>198</sup> The danger here, as Lerone Bennett points out in his critique of *Sweetback*, is that “[i]nstead of giving us new images of black rebels, it carries us back to antiquated white stereotypes, subtly and invidiously identified with black reality” (112). Much as studios like American International Pictures and Allied Artists promised 1950s teenagers films which purportedly defined their experiences *as teenagers*, that is, as a subculture which had not been able to view themselves realistically in the mirror of media images, 1970s urban black audiences were pitched a product that never quite lived up to its hype. Heroes like *Sweetback*, *Youngblood Priest* and *Coffy* were all successful in their goals of defeating the establishment (the police, the Mafia and the drug trade, respectively) however the individualistic solutions these films offered were impractical for the audience to undertake in their own lives. While revolution raged on screen the world outside the theaters remained firmly in the status quo. Furthermore, the

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<sup>198</sup> And what was the appeal for white audiences? If, as Eric Lott has argued, the tradition of blackface is tied to a desire to both reify the borders of race while also transgressing those borders, then blaxploitation films clearly fulfilled these desires. Lott writes that in the minstrel tradition, “To wear or enjoy blackface was literally, for a time, to become black, to inherit the cool, virility, humility, abandon, or *gaité de Coeur* that were the prime components of white ideologies of black manhood” (“White” 479). The white audience’s enjoyment of blaxploitation films was surely tied to this perception that to enjoy or “get” the blackness performed in texts like *Superfly* or *Coffy*, was to somehow “inherit” the aura of urban cool portrayed in the films.

inherently conservative ideologies embedded in exploitation films are problematic given that they are “made on the cheap for, aggressively marketed to, and designed to profit from the audiences that are commonly excluded from the major circuits of economic production, cultural consumption and symbolic exchange” (Strenger 7). While blaxploitation films were an entertaining change of pace from the black cast films which preceded them, the cycle garnered its impressive box office through an exploitation of its audience’s thirst for authentic, proactive images of blackness, images which were ultimately, for many, as damaging as those found on the cinematic plantations of the 1930s and 1940s.

#### **4.2.4 The “Gangsploitation” Cycle**

The 1990s definition of blackness which was marketed in the ghetto action cycle also closely correlated with the images of blackness circulating in the mainstream media. S. Craig Watkins aligns this definition of “authentic blackness” with the “two elements that commonly arouse popular appetites: sex and violence. Young African-American men ‘strapped’ (armed with guns), ‘gangbanging’ (killing each other), and ‘slingin’ (dealing drugs) became staple images in the ghetto film cycle” (“Ghetto Reelness” 238). While studios tapped into the politically charged atmosphere of the 1970s to create an image of blackness based upon the politics of black nationalism, the images of blackness employed to sell the ghetto action cycle were not tied to or reflective of any particular political movement. Rather, the cycle capitalized on a specific definition of blackness, connoting contemporaneity and youth culture. There was no political movement to which the ghetto action cycle might be aligned. Although rap music held the promise of initiating a sustained political critique in addition to a genuine black cultural

expression, this promise faltered in the 1990s with the mainstream acceptance of gangsta rap.

Todd Boyd explains:

The emergence of gangsta rap has seen an open rejection of politics by those involved...This rejection of a political agenda is consistent with Spike Lee's mainstreaming of the most important figure of Black nationalism, Malcolm X...These events mark the end of a political flirtation in rap music, and by extension, African American popular culture. (*Am I Black Enough* 39).

This is not to say that there was no political activity in the black community in the 1990s, however there was no major popular political movement along the same lines as the Civil Rights or Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s. As Boyd points out, in the 1990s, politics had been reduced to a sign, an "X" on a black baseball cap, for example, that could be seen on teenagers everywhere, but which lacked any form of engagement: "Through an intense combination of media manipulation and artistic culpability, the issue of class struggle has been reduced to mere spectacle, as opposed to a sustained critical interrogation of domination and oppression" (Boyd *Am I Black Enough* 41). Ed Guerrero agrees with this assessment, pointing out that while the cinema of the 1990s expresses a profound frustration, even rage, over the state of race relations, there was no collective political focus in these films: "Ironically, the social character of this anger is the dialectical opposite of the passion that helped overdetermine the inception of the Blaxploitation boom...from the mid-1980s onward we have witnessed the rise of an insidious, socially fragmenting violence driven by the availability of cheap guns and crack cocaine in the nation's partitioned inner cities" (159).

In order to exploit these contemporary anxieties marketers of the ghetto action cycle claimed that their films exposed the "truth" about life in the inner city. However, these

marketers went one step further in that the ballyhoo surrounding the exploitation of these films effectively drew in an audience hungry for a slice of what was pitched as “authentic” black urban life, an authenticity that threatened to spill out into the theater. While audiences were not necessarily in danger when they went to see a film like *Boyz N the Hood*, the film’s ballyhoo lent a sense of danger to that viewing experience. The target audiences for these films—teenage fans of gangsta rap (of all races)—would have been attracted to these films precisely because they promised to provide, in visual form, what they heard about in their favorite music: tales of police brutality, drive by shootings and drug dealing. What is surprising about this sensationalist, violence-oriented marketing strategy is that the majority of the films in the ghetto action cycle—particularly *Boyz N the Hood* and *Juice*—articulated strong anti-violence and anti-gun messages. These prosocial readings were further supported by the films’ directors in interviews and in studio-issued press kits.

*Boyz N the Hood* was initially received by mainstream critics and journalists (in national newspapers like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times* as well as black-targeted periodicals like *Jet* and *Essence*)<sup>199</sup> as socially significant, “timely,” “realistic” and reflective of the problems facing urban black teenagers in the early 1990s—a view echoing Singleton’s own claims. In an *Essence* interview, published approximately three months after the film’s initial release in July of 1991, Singleton explains “My whole thing is that if I make intelligent street movies for a common audience about common people, my generation will learn something” (Little). Singleton felt that in making *Boyz N the Hood* he was educating “his generation” about the importance of a college education, parental responsibility and the rejection of gang violence. The interview also mentions that “Singleton’s own life mirrors that of

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<sup>199</sup> See Chapter 2 for an analysis of *Boyz N the Hood*’s early reception.

the main characters...” (Little). This autobiographical information, including the fact that Singleton grew up in a South Central neighborhood similar to the one depicted in the film, was emphasized in many of the interviews preceding and following the film’s release. This perceived “authenticity” or realism of *Boyz N the Hood* was one of its initial marketing hooks. In a *Time* profile of Singleton, published shortly before the 1992 Academy Awards ceremony (Singleton was nominated for Best Director), the director explains why he fought to direct his screenplay after it was purchased by Columbia Pictures: “So many bad films had been made about black people, and most of them had been done by people who weren’t African American...I wasn’t going to let some fool from Encino direct a movie about living in *my neighborhood*” (Simpson, emphasis mine). And in an interview in *Ebony* in November of 1991 Singleton describes his film as a “powerful drama depicting the first realistic portrait of what it’s like to be young, Black and American in the ‘90s” (“Angry”).

Although here and in other interviews Singleton stressed the authenticity of his film as a way to alert potential audiences that it was of social importance and a corrective to previous, unrealistic depictions of black youth, the studio’s marketing of *Boyz N the Hood*’s authenticity packaged the film in a very different way; Singleton’s definition of authenticity was tied to his personal experiences, community pride and social responsibility while the studio’s definition of authenticity was tied to images of threatening black masculinity, violence and guns. For example, film’s teaser trailer begins with a television displaying black and white combat footage from Vietnam as a voice-over intones, “Five minutes away from your nice, *safe* neighborhood, there’s a war going on.” The next image is of a black hand shooting a machine gun into the air followed by black teenagers fleeing the site of what appears to be a drive by shooting. The next shot is a clip from one of Doughboy’s monologues in which he laments

“Either they don’t know, don’t show or don’t care about what’s going on in the ‘hood.” This brief trailer then concludes with the words “*Boyz N the Hood*...it’s the kind of news that usually gets buried” as we see the image of a dead black teenager abandoned in a deserted lot. The implication here is that this dead teenager is precisely the news that is not “buried” in *Boyz N the Hood*. These images hardly convey Singleton’s concept of a “black *American Graffiti*” (“Angry”), an analogy which implies a lighter, coming of age tale. Likewise, the trailer’s opening statement posits *Boyz N the Hood*’s screen violence as an enticement to come to the theater—a challenge (or taunt) to the suburban viewer who might otherwise to be too frightened to leave the confines of his/her “nice, *safe*” neighborhood.

The longer, theatrical trailer for *Boyz N the Hood* also opens with the same warlike imagery. Over the Columbia Pictures logo we hear sounds of police sirens as a somber newscaster declares: “Los Angeles, gang capital of the world.” This trailer fleshes out more of the film’s coming of age narrative by briefly recounting the stories of its three central characters: “Tre wanted to work his way up, Ricky was looking for a better life, Doughboy was living by the laws of the street.” Despite this more nuanced account of the film’s actual narrative, the trailer nevertheless concludes with a montage of the film’s most violent images, set to the nihilistic, street’s-eye-view Ice Cube single, “How to Survive in South Central” (1991).<sup>200</sup> Images include drive-by shootings, characters being hand-cuffed or harassed by the police and characters fleeing from offscreen assailants wielding guns. This montage culminates in a series of brief images featuring angry black males shooting their guns directly at the viewer. This trailer gives viewers

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<sup>200</sup> The edited lyrics, as they appear in the trailer, are as follows “ Rule number one: get yourself a gun/ A nine in your ass’ll be fine/ Keep it in your glove compartment/ ‘Cause jackers (yo) they love to start shit... Rule number two: don’t trust nobody/especially a bitch, with a hooker’s body/’cause it ain’t nuttin but a trap/ And females’ll get jacked and kidnapped... Rule number three: don’t get caught up/’Cause niggaz aren’t doing anything that’s thought up/And they got a vice/on everything from dope, to stolen merchandise.”

the impression that *Boyz N the Hood* is a violent action film about “life on the streets,” in the mode of blaxploitation fare like *Superfly* or *The Mack* (1973, Michael Campus).

The press kit for *Boyz N the Hood* supported the trailer’s violent imagery by equating the film’s authenticity with its links to real life gang culture. For example, the press kit describes how three members of a South Central Los Angeles gang acted as consultants on the film, providing input on the actors’ wardrobes, dialect and dialogue in order to “most accurately reflect current reality.” These materials also mention that because many of the locations where the film was being shot overlapped with actual gang territory, the crew required the onset security of both the Los Angeles Police Department as well as the Fruits of Islam, the Nation of Islam’s security force (it was believed that the latter’s authority was more likely to be respected by the local black community). The press kit also implies that, like the flak jacket clad reporters who fly to war zones in order to get their story, the film’s crew was risking its own safety in order to make *Boyz N the Hood*. The press kit explains that “the film aims to give the first true picture of what life is like in the ‘LA Hood’. It was not uncommon during production for police helicopters to circle above nearby houses, for gang members to object that actors were wearing an opposing gang’s colors or for police cars to speed past the set in high pursuit.” In this way *Boyz N the Hood*’s authenticity was linked with its potential for generating audience violence, the on set participation of gang members and even its proximity to violence during the film’s production.<sup>201</sup>

The hypocrisy of *Boyz N the Hood*’s promotional strategies was frequently discussed in contemporary media coverage of the film’s exhibition. In a 1991 *Ebony* piece entitled “What’s Behind the Black-on-Black Violence at Movie Theaters,” Singleton defended

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<sup>201</sup> Note to reader: I just became aware of the existence of a “making of” documentary for *Boyz N the Hood* entitled *Friendly Fire: Making an Urban Legend* (1993, Todd Williams), which I plan to screen in the near future.

the marketing of his film, claiming that these strategies “helped people to come to the theaters. If we had shown all the poetic parts, people would have said ‘I don’t want to see that.’ So we did what we had to so to get people in the theaters” (qtd. in Collier). However, in the same article, director Robert Townsend argues that, in his estimation, it was precisely this promotional campaign that led to the outbreaks at violence at theaters showing the film: “I think when you have a lot of shooting in your promotional material and the publicity shows a lot of guns and violence, people respond to that...Anytime you talk about gangs, it’s going to bring out that element” (qtd. in Collier). Columbia Pictures also came under fire, leading its chairman, Frank Price, to defend the studio in a *New York Times* letter to the editor: “Our advertising [for *Boyz N the Hood*] promised entertainment and action—in line with the conventions of the motion picture business. But in no way have we sought to exploit or pander to violence.” By the time *Boyz N the Hood* was released on VHS and laserdisc (in March of 1992), Columbia Pictures made the decision to alter its original marketing campaign. While the theatrical poster contained the tagline “Once upon a time in South Central L.A....It ain’t no fairytale,” the poster for the film’s video release contained a new tagline “Increase the Peace” (“Boyz N the Hood”). This tagline, appearing *after* the outbreaks of theater violence, is most likely an attempt to counter criticism that the film sensationalized its violence and downplayed its prosocial themes.

While the violence which broke out at screenings of *Boyz N the Hood* (resulting in two fatalities and over thirty injuries) caused twenty-one theaters to drop the film, it did not have a negative impact on the film’s box office. Seeing that the film grossed over \$10 million in its opening weekend, 102 theaters picked it up for the following weekend (Leland). In her analysis of the coverage of theater violence at the screenings of *New Jack City* and *Boyz N the Hood*, Laura Baker found that “These two films owed their notoriety less to their subject matter than to

the incidents of violence that accompanied their exhibition.” I contend that this notoriety added to the film’s appeal to “authenticity,” much as 1950s exploiters brought nurses with smelling salts and ambulances to screenings of their venereal disease or “birth of a baby” films, in order to literalize the graphic, authentic nature of the film’s footage. One exploiter of the late 1960s and 1970s, Joe Solomon (*The Black Klansman* [1966], *Tower of Evil* [1972]), recalls the positive impact of having a media frenzy surrounding his pictures “I’d turn off the ventilation in the theater, or throw some kind of crap into the ventilation, some gas to make them nauseous, and I’d call the local paper to come and get a picture of people fainting...By now we had every guy in town ready to see that picture” (qtd. in Betrock 21). Solomon took this (planned) negative reaction to the film’s content and parlayed it into the film’s ballyhoo, its primary selling point.

Similarly, after the media reported on the violence linked with screenings of *Boyz n the Hood*, Columbia Pictures offered to compensate theaters for extra security while theaters in South Central Los Angeles banned gang colors from screenings and gave lectures to the audience before running the film (Leland). Columbia Picture’s attempts to manage audiences implied that viewers would be driven to acts of violence themselves if not properly “handled” by the theaters. Was this policing of the crowd necessary given the sensational subject matter contained in the film, or was it merely an updated form of Solomon’s ballyhoo? After all, as Eric Schaefer has documented, one classic ballyhoo technique was to restrict particularly licentious films to “adults only” screenings, to segregate screenings by gender and/or to warn audiences about the potentially dangerous effects of watching the sensational imagery contained in the film. For example, the theatrical poster for the 1948 exploitation film, *Because of Eve* (Howard Bretherton), includes a list of screening times which are broken down according to gender and age: “ Women only and high school age girls: 2 and 7 P.M. Men only and high school age boys:

9: 00 P.M.” (Nourmand and Marsh 109). Such self policing measures served two purposes: it made the filmmakers and exhibitors appear socially responsible and, more importantly, adults-only shows lured in viewers with the promise of images that were deemed too risqué for general or “mixed” audiences or for the weak of heart (*Bold!* 124).

Six months after the *Boyz N the Hood* premiere, when memories of the theater violence associated with “black” films were still fresh in the public imagination, Ernest R. Dickerson released his ghetto action film, *Juice*. Whereas the studio and director-generated discourses surrounding *Boyz N the Hood* and the more overtly violent *New Jack City* made claims about the educational value of their films<sup>202</sup> (another tactic employed by the classical exploitation film [Schaefer 105]), *Juice*’s marketing campaign focused primarily on its sensational, violent aspects (again, despite the fact that the film promotes an antiviolence message). In other words, it seemed as if the films’ marketers wanted to associate *Juice* with, rather than distance it from, the outbreaks of theater violence that had occurred with other ghetto action films. One promotional advertisement, appearing in a January 1992 issue of *The Source*, prominently features one of the film’s protagonists, played by Tupac Shakur, in the foreground of the frame (the other three protagonists appear behind him, in diminishing size). Shakur, a popular rapper whose persona, by the time of the film’s release, was already associated with violence and criminality,<sup>203</sup> holds a small revolver and looks off to the side, as if pursued by an

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<sup>202</sup> For example, in *New Jack City*’s press kit, director Mario Van Peebles is quoted as saying “[Drugs are] an amazing, terrible thing to witness, but its also a lesson that can be learned and acted upon. We hope we can generate both responses.” And in the aforementioned *Jet* piece on theater violence, Van Peebles explains “When I did *New Jack City*, I saw an opportunity to make a movie that kids would go see; to make edutainment...” (“Who Should Be Blamed?” 57).

<sup>203</sup> In late 1991 Shakur, once a member of the Digital Underground, released his first solo album *2Pacalypse Now*. Although the album did not do well on the charts, it gained notoriety when a Texas teenager claimed that the album incited him to shoot and kill a Texas Trooper. Dan Quayle subsequently made a public statement that the album had “no place in our society” (Phillips G1). The association between Shakur and gang violence would only grow stronger throughout the early 1990s, culminating in his murder in September of 1996.

unseen enemy. This poster confronts the viewer, daring him or her to see the film, with the tagline “How much juice can you handle?”

The poster proved to be incendiary, at least within the world of the media. A *Hollywood Reporter* article published on January 10, 1992 quotes Los Angeles police detective Jay St. John, who compares the ad to “waving a red flag in front of a bull” (Busch “Paramount Marketing”). Just three days after this piece appeared, it was widely reported that Paramount Pictures, the film’s distributors, had redesigned the original poster. The revolver in Shakur’s hand was airbrushed out and replaced with an image of one of his hands cradling the other. Of course, the redesigned poster, even without the prominent image of a revolver, retains the same sentiments as the first. The tagline reads “Power. Respect. Juice. How far will you go to get it?” Once again it is significant that the viewer is implicated by the tagline; potential audience members are asked to imagine themselves in the place of the film’s protagonists, as urban street toughs who may have to do something unsavory obtain the elusive “juice”<sup>204</sup> to which the poster refers. Likewise, the poster still features Shakur, who plays Bishop, the film’s most violent, out of control character, as the most prominent figure in the frame. The character with whom the viewer is meant to identify, Q (Omar Epps)—the only one to denounce Bishop’s violent credo at the film’s conclusion—is partially obscured in the poster, peeking out from behind the latter’s hood. This poster visually marginalizes its antiviolence themes while simultaneously promoting its most violent and sensational elements.

In a 1992 article for *The Source* entitled “Crying Over Spilled *Juice*,” Kierno Mayo points out that the ad campaigns for contemporaneous films like *Rush* (1991, Lili Fini Zanuck) and *Kuffs* (1992, Bruce A. Evans) also featured white characters holding guns (in the ad

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<sup>204</sup> “Juice” is a term referring to credibility or respect on the street. In other words, a person with juice is someone who is believed to be tough and should not be challenged.

for *Rush* a revolver takes up approximately one-third of the poster). And the *Kuffs* poster, like the *Juice* poster, directly addresses the viewer with the question “When you have attitude who needs experience?” While Christian Slater is smirking in this poster (*Kuffs* is billed as a comedy), the tagline nevertheless conveys the idea that a large gun, aka, “attitude,” can act as an equalizer in confrontational situations. Despite these similarities with *Juice*’s campaign, neither *Rush*’s nor *Kuffs*’ advertising campaign was publicly discussed or altered for fear of inciting violence. Mayo therefore wonders, “A Paramount representative said that the removal of the gun was part of the normal evolution of a movie ad, but how normal is it when the Paramount president issues a statement about the ad’s ‘evolution’ to media across the country?” (15).<sup>205</sup> Paramount could have just as easily released several different versions of the film’s poster without comment, but these extra, *public* steps to ensure that screenings of *Juice* did not lead to any incidents of violence, appears to be a calculated promotional campaign to ensure just the opposite. The public discussions of Paramount’s ad campaigns exploited the violent undertones of the film, implying that its subject matter was so incendiary that even a still image on a poster could ignite volatile behavior. Warrington Hudlin, co-founder of the Black Filmmaker Foundation, was outraged over the way the incident was handled “There is a general fear of black youth in America. A black with a gun is a nightmare in America. The implication [of having to remove the gun] is chilling to me. It says to me that you can have white people with guns, but can’t have black people with guns in [movie] ads” (qtd. in Busch “Studios struggle”). Furthermore, by recreating the narratives of containment associated with *Boyz N the Hood*—newspapers reported that Paramount was offering free security assistance for urban theaters that would be screening the

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<sup>205</sup> George Jackson, a co-producer of *New Jack City*, expressed outrage over what he saw as a double standard in the way Paramount handled the *Juice* campaign: “I think this is a little unfair, and it’s an issue which I think is borderline racism” (qtd. in King B6).

film, that it would be “flexible on contract terms with theater chains that elect not to run *Juice* at danger-prone locations” (King B6), and that it would only screen the film at later times so that patrons for *Juice* would not be standing on line at the same time as audiences for family films—the studio ensured that *Juice* would make headlines as another potential powder keg of urban theater violence.<sup>206</sup>

Despite, or rather because of, the “precautions” taken by both Paramount and theater chains to police the film’s audience, the opening of *Juice* was greeted with sensational headlines linking it with theater violence. Gunfire, knife fights and fistfights were reported at screenings in Boston, New York, Anchorage, Omaha, Lansing and North Little Rock, and Chicago (Lippman A3). Although there was no indication that these incidents were directly related to the film’s content—in fact interviews with police on the scene indicated that some of the incidents were purely coincidental (Lippman A3)—newspaper and magazine headlines created direct links between this violence and the exhibition of a black film. For example, *The Washington Post* proclaimed: “Outbreaks of Violence Mar Opening of ‘Juice’; Gunfire Outside Theater Kills Chicago Girl” and “Streetwise Film ‘Juice’ Stirs Up Bad Publicity,” *The Christian Science Monitor* contained a piece entitled “Jittery Over ‘Juice’; Paramount Steps Up Security for Film” and *New Pittsburgh Courier* made the link explicit with the headline “‘Juice’ Violence: By-Product of Films.” As with the theater violence associated with *New Jack City* and *Boyz n the Hood*, any violence occurring in and around theaters was linked to the exhibition of a “black” film. Likewise, in the media there appeared to be a general anxiety surrounding the concept of a crowd of African Americans filmgoers, regardless of the type of film being screened;

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<sup>206</sup> In an article entitled “Streetwise Film *Juice* Stirs Up Bad Publicity” in *The Christian Science Monitor*, the reporter acknowledges that Paramount may have fanned the fires of controversy while appearing, on the surface, to cool them “Paramount Pictures managed to spark an extra debate over *Juice*...before it opened anywhere.”

“blackness,” whether on the screen, in an advertisement, or in the audience, was perceived to be at the root of this violence.<sup>207</sup> Laura Baker adds that “Mainstream journalists’ and film critics’ interpretations of these events assumed two familiar forms, oscillating between the fear that media spectacles of violence elicited Pavlovian responses from unsophisticated audiences and the fear that such audiences were intractable to the film’s antiviolence messages.”

While I do not believe that Paramount planned for (or desired) the violent incidents surrounding the exhibition of *Juice*, they nevertheless *cultivated* an explicitly violent advertising campaign (even as they denied it). In a *New York Times* piece, published just days after a Chicago girl was killed outside of a theater that was screening *Juice*, movie critic Janet Maslin points out the disparities between the film’s anti-violence message and the sensationalist advertising campaign which helped to “frame the message”: “Like the English rock star played by Eric Bogosian in *Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll*, the one who speaks so invitingly of all the debauchery he has given up, *Juice* conveys a vivid sense of the temptations its characters try to resist” (C13). Likewise, Michael Patrick, president of Carmike Cinemas, explained the violence surrounding *Boyz N the Hood* in this way “A lot of the problem is coming from the news media discussing the potential of media violence ahead of time...Of course, the marketing is tied into that. One tends to escalate the other” (qtd. in Ptacek “Despite Violence”). Here again is the classic exploitation technique<sup>208</sup> of using poster art and ballyhoo in order to promise the audience a certain sensational experience (either dealing with sex, violence or the taboo in general) which never surfaces in the film proper (although in this case, it did surface *outside* of

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<sup>207</sup> Throughout the early 1990s, black films were frequently linked with incidents of real life violence. See “Lee Counters Actor’s Claim He and Singleton Are to Blame for L.A. Rioting,” in *Jet* and “Advertising: Suit Raises Issues of Ad Link to Violence,” in the *Wall Street Journal*.

<sup>208</sup> In fact, in a promotional interview (appearing on the same day as *Juice*’s premiere), Dickerson compares his film with a “B-movie” “I’ve always felt that lower-budget films that were made, like, in the ‘50s and ‘60s had more electricity than everything else that was coming out at the time. So I tried to emulate that” (qtd. in Mills C1).

the film). And much as Singleton defended his film's promotional campaign by pleading box office, Dickerson offered a similar justification for *Juice*'s media campaign "You can't expect people to come see [*Juice*] if they feel they're being preached to. In order to really get people to respond to your story, you do have to couch it in a kind of entertainment...I want to reach as wide an audience as possible. Basically because it'll make it easier for me to make my next movie" (qtd. in Mills C1). Dickerson's words proved prophetic—*Juice* grossed over \$8 million in its opening weekend and made a total of \$20 million in domestic grosses ("Juice"). And although the film did not provide Dickerson with a series of high-profile directing projects (he went on to direct pictures like *Surviving the Game* [1994], *Demon Knight* [1995] and *Bulletproof* [1996]), *Juice* did help to further solidify the success of the ghetto action template. Indeed, it appears that studios, marketers and even the directors of these films, doubted that they could attract their target audience unless they promoted the violent aspects of their films.

Since, in the 1990s one prevailing definition of urban blackness that circulated throughout the mainstream media and popular culture as a whole centered on the concepts of violence, masculinity and rap music, it is not surprising that Columbia and Paramount would wish to capitalize on these images in *Boyz N the Hood*'s and *Juice*'s promotional materials, even if each film's narrative ultimately rejected these images as negative and deadly. Within these discourses the "reality" which the directors of ghetto action films wished to infuse into their films was made synonymous with crime, violence and gang culture in general. Just as only a small portion of black male city-dwelling teenagers in the 1990s were gang bangers or criminals, only a few scenes in *Boyz N the Hood* and *Juice* actually contained moments of violence and aggression. On the whole both films' narratives stress the significance of family and education in the lives of their young protagonists. However, if one only paid attention to print advertisements,

trailers and media coverage, these films would appear to be consumed with violence and tragedy. This narrow view of ghetto action films was also problematic because, as with blaxploitation films, the skewed definitions of blackness appearing in the ghetto action cycle and their surrounding discourses were often collapsed in the mainstream (white) imagination with the contemporary, real world black experience. These violent, aggressive images of masculinity fit in neatly with the way young black males were depicted in the mainstream media. In fact, Laura Baker found that “in almost every account [of theater violence at *New Jack City* and *Boyz*], ‘gang members’ was consistently interchanged with ‘urban youth,’ ‘individuals prone to violence,’ and ‘black audiences,’ a slippage that both racialized and pathologized gang members and made all black moviegoers suspect of violent behavior.”<sup>209</sup> My belief is that this particular reception of the ghetto action cycle was consciously encouraged by the studios releasing these films. As in the 1970s, marketers realized that one specific definition of blackness, correlating to the mainstream’s and the media’s prevailing definitions of the term, could generate a considerable box office. Even better, in the 1990s this particular ballyhoo automatically drew in the most desirable audience demographic—white, middle class, teenage fans of gangsta rap.<sup>210</sup>

The marketing lessons learned from *Boyz N the Hood* and *Juice* are simple: in order to generate a healthy box office, ghetto action films must be promoted as *more* authentic, *more* “black,” and therefore *more* violent than the films which preceded them. As a representative of Motivational Educational Entertainment put it, “If you don’t target the hardcore, you don’t get the suburbs” (qtd. in Spiegler). In other words, in order to grab the coveted

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<sup>209</sup> In a 1991 *Jet* interview, Douglas McHenry, a co-producer of *New Jack City* explains that “Three people were murdered during [a screening of] *Godfather III*. If it had been White people rioting in Westwood, this situation wouldn’t have been blown out of proportion” (“Who Should be Blamed?” 57)

<sup>210</sup> In a 1991 interview, Elvis Mitchell, a film critic for NPR, described the ghetto action cycle and other black films released at this time thusly “When Hollywood realized that white kids were really into rap—and don’t kid yourself, that’s the audience the studios are really lusting for—a little light went on: ‘Hey we can make money from black culture!’” (qtd. in Bates 18).

middle class youth demographic it is necessary to appeal to a so-called “hard core,” black inner city audience, an audience that presumably *wants* to see images of violent, hypermasculine blackness. Consequently, the marketing campaign for *Menace II Society* invoked the specter of previous ghetto action films, not as objects of comparison, but of contrast. In an October 1992 interview in *The Source*, Allen Hughes claims that the film’s script initially met with resistance from studio executives because the characters were so unsympathetic: “White people can’t relate to us. Period. *Boyz N the Hood* got made ‘cause it was 100% street with a sympathetic character. You can’t tell no black story without one” (qtd. in McCreary 24). The implication here is that Singleton had to somehow “appease” white studios in order to get his “black film” made, whereas the Hughes brothers were able to make an uncompromised, and therefore more realistic, vision of inner city life. Likewise in an interview in *The Washington Post* (published one month after the film’s release), Allen Hughes defends the violence in his film by claiming that “No other movie has dealt with the reality of [violence]. *New Jack City* was a comic book look at it. *Juice* was a comic book look at it...” (qtd. in French G4). According to Hughes, “gangsters” hated *Boyz N the Hood* and called it “Toyz N the Hood” because “It had good guys going through this bad city, on their way to college” (qtd. in French G4).

Discourses issued by mainstream critics often echoed this comparison with, and distance from, earlier ghetto action films, as a way to praise *Menace*. Stephen Holden’s review in the *New York Times* claims that: “Where earlier films with similar settings, like John Singleton’s *Boyz N the Hood* and Matty Rich’s *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, have offered a somber, almost elegiac view of inner-city life, *Menace II Society* has a manic energy and at times a lyricism that recall movies like *Mean Streets* and *Bonnie and Clyde*. More acutely than any movie before, it gives cinematic expression to the hot-tempered, defiantly nihilistic ethos that ignites gangster

rap.” By invoking *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967, Arthur Penn), a film credited with embodying the angst and anti-establishment spirit of the contemporary youth culture, and *Mean Streets* (1973, Martin Scorsese), remembered for its groundbreaking “realistic” depiction of inner city criminality, Holden reiterates *Menace II Society*’s two primary marketing hooks: its appeal to the youth market and its perceived authenticity or realism. And although, as I will argue later, many black critics began to weary of the ghetto action formula by 1993, alarmed by its images of young black criminals, many prominent black critics nevertheless supported a reading of *Menace II Society* as “authentic” and socially significant. In his review of *Menace II Society* in *ArtForum*, for example, Arthur Jafa lauds the film and its “unflinching look at the despair and hopelessness underlying the rage so characteristic of young black male urban reality” and compares it with the neorealist *Killer of Sheep* (1977, Charles Burnett). He also recounts an anecdote about the Hughes brothers’ initial meeting with New Line Cinema: “When this script was compared to *Boyz N the Hood* [the Hughes brothers] shouted ‘*Boyz in the Hood* [sic], fuck *Boyz in the Hood*, we’ll show you some real violence,’ upon which they were quickly signed. I laughed when told this.” Though Jafa seems to be implying that the story is apocryphal or at least exaggerated, he agrees that the film makes *Boyz N the Hood* “seem like *The Cosby Show*.” The implication here is that *Boyz N the Hood* is somehow sanitized, diluted and/or pandering to white middle class tastes, while *Menace II Society* is a far more truthful depiction of inner city life because of its heightened violence. Stanley Crouch’s review in *The Washington Post* likewise invokes previous entries in the ghetto action cycle, claiming that they are far below *Menace II Society*’s “craft and visceral thrust,” adding that the film “helped to clarify our American identity while also saying things central to understanding the tragedy of human life in the modern world, where the democratization of violence travels at a terrifying pace” (G1).

Crouch could have just as easily been describing the evolution of the ghetto action cycle itself as *Menace II Society* was by far its most violent entry to date (with the possible exception of *New Jack City*). The discourses surrounding the film consistently linked this violence with the film's authenticity, with its presumed ability to tell the real truth about the real experiences of urban black youth. The theatrical poster for *Menace II Society* features images of Caine and O-Dog, walking through the streets of South Central Los Angeles, with a group of unidentified black males playing dice behind them. In the right hand corner are the words "This is the truth. This is what's real." These words are as much a claim to the film's "message" as they are to its status as an authentic slice of blackness. Though this is a bold and problematic claim, it was a useful marketing ploy in the early 1990s since, according to S. Craig Watkins, "one of the most fascinating developments of the [ghetto action] cycle's reception is the notion that this group of popular movies represents official transcriptions of the lived experiences of poor black youth" ("Ghetto Reelness" 247). Not surprisingly, the theatrical trailer for *Menace II Society* is primarily composed of clips from some of the film's most violent moments: Caine getting beaten by cops, a drive by shooting, a street fight, a convenience store murder, etc.

As I argued in Chapter 2, by 1995 the ghetto action cycle's formula of violence, ghetto settings and young black males getting into precarious situations, was a certified cinematic cliché. Filmmakers attempting to capitalize on the financial viability of this particular definition of "blackness" were forced to seek out other genres in order to continue to generate a profit: Rusty Cundieff released a ghetto action horror film, *Tales from the Hood* (1995), while Allen and Albert Hughes tried their hand at a period drama, *Dead Presidents* (1995), which transplants *Menace II Society*'s violent coming of age narrative to the late 1960s. The ghetto action formula also proved itself to be ripe for comedic treatment in F. Gary Gray's immensely

successful *Friday* (1995), starring ghetto action cycle veteran Ice Cube as the film's unemployed protagonist Craig. Though *Friday* addresses the same "realistic" issues which appeared in previous entries in the cycle, like unemployment, drug abuse, drive-by shootings and the violent repercussions of getting involved in the ghetto's drug economy, these events are all treated with a light, comedic tone. Thus the "blackness" which is marketed in the film is based not so much on the perceived authenticity/violence promised by the film's trailer or posters, but rather through the audience's ability to recognize the signifiers of this blackness which had been deployed in previous ghetto action films. The most prominent signifier of blackness in the film's promotional materials is Ice Cube himself, who, after his turn in *Boyz N the Hood*, as well as his status as a former member of the controversial gangsta rap group, N.W.A., and a successful solo artist in his own right, became interchangeable with notions of urban cool. But rather than scowling at the viewer as he had in images from *Boyz* as well as on his album covers, the ads for *Friday* deploy the image of Ice Cube as the besieged everyman. In other words, after five years of films which rendered blackness as exotic and terrifying, *Friday* makes it both familiar and amusing.

### 4.3 RACE AND THE DEATH OF A CYCLE

In *What It Is...What It Was!: The Black Film Explosion of the '70s in Words and Pictures*, a collection of blaxploitation posters and interviews with individuals who were involved with the making of the film cycle, including actors, directors, writers, score composers and stylists, there is a running theme among the collected reflections. While almost everyone who was involved with the films claimed that the blaxploitation cycle represented a significant contribution to

American filmmaking in general and black filmmaking in particular, in hindsight (these interviews took place in the mid- to late 1990s) many interviewees arm themselves against accusations that the blaxploitation cycle represented a modern form of the minstrel show by claiming that it was a cycle that had not been allowed to “evolve” or mature. Gloria Hendry, for instance, who starred in blaxploitation films like *Black Caesar* (1973, Larry Cohen) and *Black Belt Jones* (1974, Robert Clouse), was quoted as saying: “This was a business and we would’ve evolved. But the studios and everybody were being hit so hard by the population of the churches, they didn’t give us time to grow. We needed to grow” (qtd. in Martinez 111). Other former blaxploitation stars echo this view: Isaac Hayes (*Shaft*) reflects “I think the baby would have grown up, but [the critics of blaxploitation] caught the baby just as it was crawling on its belly, on its knees and ready to stand up” (qtd. in Martinez 157) while Fred Williamson (*Black Caesar* [1973, Larry Cohen]) laments “We never really got a chance to change out of what they call black exploitation films. Maybe had we continued, they might have just called them action movies” (qtd. in Martinez 95).

Similarly, when the ghetto action cycle debuted, the trope of evolution was also employed. In a 1991 *Newsweek* article, “New Jack Cinema Enters Screening,” John Leland (*Newsweek*’s go-to expert on early 1990s black culture), analyzes the new crop of black films appearing in 1991 and surmises that “as a young esthetic just learning to walk, it’s dangerously overhyped. It’s Hollywood at its most deliciously volatile: a nut of brilliant press releases and mostly mediocre movies that might evolve into greatness, or disappear entirely” (50). In a 1994 *New York Times* interview, director Matty Rich complains: “[Hollywood] keep[s] throwing those [rap movies or ‘hood movies] at us and black film makers keep coming back with the same kind of script to the studios. We don’t evolve” (Rule C13). And in a 1993 *Wall Street Journal* piece

on black film entrepreneurship, director Mario Van Peebles claims that black filmmakers must get past the ghetto action formula, “it’s important that Francis Ford Coppola, an Italian-American, can step away from *The Godfather*, and make *Apocalypse Now*, where no one’s sitting around eating pasta” (King R6).

In these discourses blaxploitation films and ghetto action films are characterized as a necessary, if primitive, first step on the road to an entrenched black cinema or black film aesthetic; they are art forms that had not been allowed the proper time to grow or evolve into something “better.” In both cases the belief that these films were “babies” that were just learning to crawl was a reference not so much to cinematic style (editing, cinematography, acting), though many of these films were certainly lacking in artfulness (see *Dolemite* [1975, D’Urville Martin], *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, etc.), as it was to the films’ inadvertently offensive, and occasionally explicitly racist, subject matter. These films were deemed exploitative not because they dealt in stereotypes, but because of the kind of stereotypes they chose to deploy. In other words, the images of drug pushers, prostitutes, gangstas and pimps which populated these two cycles did not perform the service of making an informed social critique. These films did not offer a political or revolutionary message, or at least not the message that the cycles’ critics desired. Many critics also feared that some viewers would see violent gangstas like *Menace II Society*’s O-Dog or drug pushers like *Superfly*’s Preist as heroes, as characters to emulate. Indeed, these films often toed the line between glamorizing the actions of these negative role models (via musical soundtracks, cinematography, costuming choices and narrative resolutions) and condemning them.

The debates that emerged around these two film cycles have plagued black cinema since its inception. As Jane Gaines has noted, early race films, like those directed by

Oscar Micheaux, were found lacking because of their conventionality, their impersonation of dominant white cinema and their seeming lack of politics, leading her to wonder “why we must always choose between progressive politics and popular audiences” (4). She later adds “*wanting something back* from the image has the potential to be one of the most radical demands that has ever been made on the cinema...If the viewer simply wants confirmation of who he or she is, why not just look in the mirror?” (266). While the first half of this chapter examined how images of blackness have been periodically exploited by studios in order to initiate lucrative film cycles, the remainder of this chapter investigates how the signifiers which initially acted as a catalyst for the blaxploitation and ghetto action cycles ultimately worked to implode these cycles.<sup>211</sup> How did images, which were once embraced as significant and cutting edge, come to be understood as offensive, exploitative and even physically dangerous? And why do viewers so often “want something back” from black film imagery?

#### **4.3.1 The End of the Blaxploitation Cycle**

Since its inception the blaxploitation cycle was criticized for its representation of the black urban community. Though *Sweetback* was lauded for being one of the only films to grapple with the contemporary urban black experience, it was precisely its status as the “first” and the “only” that drew the ire of so many viewers. With so few black films in existence, the heavy weight of “responsible representation” fell onto the shoulders of those few texts circulating in the popular culture landscape. In its favor, *Sweetback* offered an alternative to the chaste, middle class

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<sup>211</sup> Economics also played a role in the disappearance of both cycles; once studios recovered from their respective box office slumps they no longer needed their “reserve” black audience to recoup profits. However, the change in both cycles is, I believe, also tied to the fact that they relied on images of blackness for their primary appeal.

characters played by Sidney Poitier which emerged in the 1960s, much as Poitier offered an alternative to the tragic mulattas or happy servant stereotypes of earlier decades. But these new images, which were nevertheless caricatures, could hardly satisfy the complexity and diversity of the black experience, making *Sweetback*, as Lerone Bennett points out, a “negative landmark,” in black filmic representation since “after it, we can never see black people in film (noble, suffering, losing) in the same way” (116).

Along the same lines, if mainstream cinema had already been filled with a diverse range of black images—doctors as well as lowlifes, police detectives as well as pimps and pushers, domestic goddesses as well as hypersexual vixens—then it is my belief that the blaxploitation cycle never would have come into existence. Studios exploited the images of blackness found in films like *Sweetback* because, at least initially, they were marginal and therefore scandalous and exciting. Viewers wanted to see what they had not seen before on the big screen—namely, active, assertive black characters as an antidote to the saintly or suffering images of blackness that had populated the cinema of the 1960s (Guerrero 76). And while images of black characters who held nine to five jobs, raised their children and dealt with the trials of everyday existence were also largely absent from mainstream cinema at this time, such topics hardly represented the same exploitable hook (“See Coffy go to work! See Coffy pick her son up from school! See Coffy make coffee!”) as the hyperbolic images of the blaxploitation cycle. As Keenan Ivory Wayans recalls “I was very young when I saw *Shaft*. What I loved about *Shaft* was it was the first time I ever saw a brother with attitude on screen” (qtd in Martinez 82). Images of drug pushers and pimps were amenable to both an exciting visual image but also to a certain commodification of style and attitude. Much as the 1960s youth counterculture gravitated to films like *Bonnie and Clyde*, not because they wanted to kill people and rob banks, but

because they wished to emulate the attitude, style and defiance of the status quo embodied by the film's protagonists, 1970s urban blacks found the swagger and attitude of the blaxploitation protagonists to be exciting and potentially revolutionary (even if they were not) (Guerrero 81-82). In fact, following the success of *Superfly*, many Los Angeles-based black teens began straightening their hair, donning midi coats and wearing small, silver coke spoons around their necks, just like the film's "super bad" protagonist (Michener 78).

In order to capitalize on a new trend and create a film cycle, studios must repeat a successful formula but with a slight difference. In the case of the blaxploitation cycle, this difference often took the form of new genres like science fiction (*The Thing with Two Heads* [1972, Lee Frost]), the Western (*Adios Amigo* [1976, Fred Williamson]) and the horror film (*Dr. Black and Mr. Hyde* [1976, William Crain]). Another way that studios attempted to extend the financial viability of the blaxploitation cycle was to "up the ante" on previous depictions of blackness. Hence, many blaxploitation films were marketed in comparison with previous entries in the cycle. *Soul Patrol* (1978, Christopher Rowley) was marketed as "Rougher & Tougher Than Anything You Have Seen Before," and *The Black Six* (1974, Matt Cimber) boasts that it is "SIX TIMES TOUGHER THAN 'SHAFT'! SIX TIMES ROUGHER THAN 'SUPERFLY'!" Each new entry in the cycle attempted to hyperbolize some aspect of the black image first established in *Sweetback*; either the hero was the ultimate ladies man, the ultimate street fighter, the ultimate criminal mastermind or the ultimate revolutionary. In this way the blaxploitation cycle took blackness, defined in one limited way, and distilled it over and over again so that a cycle which initially began as an attempt to represent the urban black experience, eventually had very little to do with that experience. As early as 1972, less than one year into the cycle, *New York Times* critic Clayton Riley (the same critic who had initially praised *Sweetback*) published a

piece entitled “Shaft Can Do Everything—I Can Do Nothing” in which he accuses blaxploitation films of being a form of “metaphorical drug-pushing”: “The hero, whether Black or White, is an elitist figure whose exploits serve to reinforce the ordinary human being’s sense of personal helplessness and inadequacy.” Riley wrote that the “cowboys and sleuths, the dope traffic aristocrats and empty-headed women, the colored Keystone cops” do not represent any recognizable slice of the contemporary black community (D9). Hyperbole stacked upon hyperbole, the blaxploitation hero was at his best, a fantasy and at his worst, a damaging stereotype.

Or at least this was the argument posed by the numerous coalitions which began to form in 1972 in protest of the emerging cycle. The first organized group, the Coalition Against Blaxploitation (CAB), was formed around the same time that Riley’s article was published—in August of 1972. Junius Griffin, then president of the Beverly Hills-Hollywood branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the primary spokesperson for CAB was critical of the cycle because, as he wrote in a *New York Times* article a few months later, “These films are taking our money while feeding us a forced diet of violence, murder, drugs and rape” (D3). His language, much like Riley’s, implies a form of coercion. Audiences, starved for any Hollywood product that might address the experiences of Black America, found themselves with a limited range of images that were often prurient and/or offensive. Thus, Griffin’s (and by extension, CAB’s) criticism of the blaxploitation cycle was rooted in the fact that its representation of blackness had come to stand in for *all* representations of blackness. He writes “If black movies do not contribute to building constructive, healthy images of black people and to fairly recording the black experience, we shall have lost our money and our souls” (D19), a sentiment echoing the push for narratives of racial uplift that

guided much of the black filmmaking in the 1920s. Jesse Jackson's People United to Save Humanity (PUSH), which was also formed in the summer of 1972, offered a similar criticism, claiming that the film industry exploited black images and themes and yet systemically denied jobs to black workers in all areas of production (Guerrero 100). Another prominent group, Blacks Against Narcotics and Genocide (BANG), was organized by Marion Barry (who was president of the Washington, D.C. School Board at the time) in reaction to the release of *Superfly* (Guerrero 101). The cycle also came under the attack of the National Urban League and prominent black pundits, like Tony Brown (of *Tony Brown's Journal*) (Clark 156).

In June of 1972, the Kuumba Workshop published an educational pamphlet<sup>212</sup> entitled "*Superfly: A Political and Cultural Condemnation*," the second position paper issued by the group on the subject of the blaxploitation cycle (the first pamphlet attacked *Sweetback*). The pamphlet opens with ten objections to the film, some of which include: its glorification of the hustler as hero, its "illusion of victory" over whites, its exploitation of sex, its lack of positive messages, its inability to address the "realities" of the urban milieu it depicts and its "questionable" (i.e., white) financial backing. Their final point is that the film "is a straight, *unadulterated hustle* of Black people's money and yearning to see themselves on screen" (no page numbers provided). Thus beyond *Superfly's* negative portrayal of the black community and unwillingness to deal with the actual socioeconomic crises facing the contemporary black community, the Kuumba workshop is primarily enraged by the film's (and the cycle's) exploitation of images of blackness: "Melvin Van Peebles [*sic*] often argues in defense of

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<sup>212</sup> The mission statement on the back of the pamphlet, published by the Institute of Positive Education, is as follows: "Our purpose is to present short position papers that serve as guides to action, serve to prompt theoretical replies, and serve to communicate to our people facts which will aid them in their thirst for life. In essence, we plan to define and offer direction for black people to consider that which cannot be found in the regular communicating vehicles." These pamphlets were to be distributed in local black book stores, churches, barber shops and beauty salons, community centers, pool halls, drug stores and news stands.

‘Sweetback’ that none of his critics ever came down on John Wayne. Well, in partial answer to Van Peebles, John Wayne never made a film allegedly ‘starring the Black Community’ as did Van Peebles...Therefore there are some things we can and should demand of him that we don’t demand of John Wayne”<sup>213</sup> (no page numbers provided).

This strong coalition of black political leaders and groups made an immediate impact in the media, with articles on the subject of “blaxploitation” and its potentially negative effects appearing in both mainstream publications like the *New York Times* and *Newsweek*, and more niche publications, like *Jet*, throughout the end of 1972.<sup>214</sup> Within the course of one year the exploitative hook that was Hollywood’s cash cow—images of urban blackness—was becoming a major liability. The film industry was no longer satisfying a need; instead, it was, according to the cycle’s critics, exploiting and demeaning the very audience it wished to captivate. In an August 1972 *Newsweek* piece, Walter Burrell, chairman of CAB’s rating committee, complained “Black people are hungry to see the black image on the screen and they’ll go and see anything. There’s got to be some responsibility” (qtd. in “Blacks vs. Shaft” 88). Actors like Richard Roundtree and Fred Williamson moved from being representatives of a new age of black filmic representation to the shameful handmaidens of white producers eager to line their pockets with the disillusioned black population’s money. Former blaxploitation cycle actress Carol Speed recalls “[Groups like the NAACP] said ‘You’re ugly; I don’t want to be a part of you.’ We went through a period where we were rejects because we had made these films” (qtd. in Martinez 170). A *New York Times* article entitled “Rising Complaints Shake Film Truce

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<sup>213</sup> Of course, John Wayne’s screen persona has also been the subject of critique, particularly his melding of his own political beliefs with his film choices, such as *The Green Berets* (1968, Ray Kellogg and John Wayne) (Wills 228-233).

<sup>214</sup> See “Shaft Can Do Everything—I Can Do Nothing” and “Black Movie Boom—Good or Bad?” in the *New York Times*, “Black Movies” in *Newsweek* and “What Films Are Doing to Image of Black Women” in *Jet*.

with Blacks” appearing in late September 1971 describes this heated environment: “A truce between Hollywood and minority groups—soothed by lucrative all-black movies and heightened minority employment—is being shaken by angry complaints, demands and charges of bias” (37). Though outwardly naïve (the blaxploitation hardly signaled a “truce” between Hollywood and minority groups) this statement raises a key issue about blaxploitation, namely, if the cycle was providing an unprecedented amount of work for black personnel, behind and in front of the cameras, then who or what was being exploited by blaxploitation?

According to contemporary interviews, the actors in these films hardly felt exploited by the cycle. Indeed, for most African American film actors, this cycle represented an unprecedented opportunity to work. Carol Speed recalls “What the NAACP did not realize is that it was not about their social cause. I was not representing any type of movement other than trying to eat and work through my craft” (qtd. in Martinez 170). Blaxploitation star Fred Williamson, who shouldered the bulk of early blaxploitation criticism, echoes Speed’s claims in a March 1973 *New York Times* profile:

I don’t make *educational* films. I make *entertainment* films. And the public is buying it, and seeing what they *want* to see. They’re paying \$3 to see their favorite people do their thing on the screen. If they were listening to these groups who are criticizing black films, the amount of money going into the box office would be diminishing. But its not. (qtd. in Klemesrud 13)

Though clearly self serving Williamson’s comment points to the fundamental doubleness, to the forces of attraction and disavowal, at play in exploitation cinema. Throughout the history of cinema audiences have simultaneously demanded and disavowed the demand for cinematic representations of violence and sex. As Fred Williamson explains, if people did not want to see

blaxploitation protagonists slinging drugs, bedding women and killing their enemies (both white and black), all while dressed in the latest contemporary fashions, then the box office would have indicated as much. While all studio products are concerned with making money, for the exploiter, money is the central and only lure. As long as audiences are buying, a particular type of film will continue to be produced.

Therefore, the abandonment of the blaxploitation cycle by major studios as early as 1974 (Clark 153), despite the fact that these films continued to make money for a few more years,<sup>215</sup> separates the blaxploitation cycle from other forms of exploitation filmmaking. The blaxploitation cycle, though primarily shaped by money, was, more than anything else, terminated as a result of its exploitation of images of blackness at a politically sensitive time (which is, ironically, precisely why the cycle was initially successful). The cycle was abandoned by major studios like MGM and Warner Brothers when it was determined that 1) they no longer needed to cater exclusively to the black population in order to draw in that audience and 2) the backlash against the cycle proved too incendiary to pursue. Though audiences continued to pay to see blaxploitation films after the backlash in 1972, it is difficult to determine what they felt about the images of blackness onscreen. The most vocal opponents of the cycle, from groups like CAB and PUSH, are indicative of the middle class and intellectual elite, leading *Superfly* star Ron O'Neal to offer this complaint "They're saying that they know better than the black people themselves what they should look at, that they're going to be the moral interpreters for the destiny of black people. I'm so tired of handkerchief-head Negroes moralizing on the poor black man" (qtd. in Guerrero 103). Likewise, Roger Corman recalls that his production and distribution company, New World Pictures, attempted to, as he puts it, to "branch out" with a social problem

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<sup>215</sup> For example *Coffy* (1973) made \$12, 944,000 at the box office and cost \$600,000 to produce, *The Mack* (1973) made \$4.3 million, *Car Wash* (1976, Charles Schultz) made \$8.5 million, etc (Martinez 58).

film entitled *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* (1978, Ralph Nelson), about a black inner city family dealing with their son's drug addictions. The film failed at the box office despite favorable reviews and a strong marketing campaign. Corman concluded that: "That indicated to me that the market for Black-themed film really was in the exploitation action-oriented films" (qtd. in Martinez 73). The box office failure of a film like *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* underscores the idea that, at least throughout the 1970s, audiences were primed and ready for exciting action fare, rather than social problem films.<sup>216</sup> Thus while it appears that the backlash against blaxploitation imagery was initially confined to one segment of the audience—middle class intellectuals (both black and white)—the stigma attached to these images of blackness, the same images which were once the source of excitement and promise, did eventually precipitate the end of the cycle. Fred Williamson recalls "[The critics] started saying 'You're showing us in the wrong light,' and Blacks got caught up in the same derogatory descriptions of the films. The producers started saying 'Well if the Blacks don't like the films then maybe we shouldn't make these films because maybe they won't go see them'" (qtd. in Martinez 94).

When the blaxploitation cycle disappeared in the late 1970s, it was not replaced, as groups like PUSH and CAB had hoped, with films depicting black characters in more varied, nuanced ways. Instead, as we have seen, the primary filmic representations of black characters in the 1980s were in all-white filmic milieus. The 1980s "cinema of recuperation" left little room for the depiction of minorities (including blacks, women and homosexuals) in anything other than a conservative framework. Though stars like Eddie Murphy, Whoopi Goldberg and Richard Pryor had leading roles in countless mainstream releases action and comedy releases throughout the 1980s, black faces were, in general, absent from cinema. Whereas 1970s films foregrounded

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<sup>216</sup> Indeed, the top moneymakers of the mid- to late 1970s were all films containing extended fight scenes or action sequences, like *Star Wars* (1977, George Lucas) and *Jaws* (1975, Steven Spielberg).

and relied upon blackness as their primary appeal, successful 1980s films contained or swallowed their black images. In his discussion of “buddy” films like *48 Hours* and *Silver Streak* Ed Guerrero explains “although streetwise, impulsive, and somewhat assertive, Murphy and Pryor have no real self-interest in these narratives, nor do they question or threaten the power relations of the dominant social order” (126). The images of blackness in these films share a kinship with those found in the blaxploitation cycle, but they did not dominate the films, nor were they used as the film’s central exploitable hook. This may also explain why, despite their often offensive and clichéd nature, a major backlash did not occur over these films the way it did in the 1970s (only in retrospect has film criticism acknowledged their underlying racism).

#### **4.3.2 The End of the Ghetto Action Cycle**

As with blaxploitation, the earliest criticism of the ghetto action cycle originated within the black middle class and the intellectual elite. In 1991, just a few months after the release of *New Jack City* and concurrent with the release of *Boyz N the Hood*, Jacquie Jones published “The New Ghetto Aesthetic” in the journal, *Wide Angle*, a scathing critique of what she saw as a dangerous new trend in filmmaking. Her fears were remarkably similar to those expressed by the critics of blaxploitation cinema. First she argued that the popularity of the images in these films “may threaten the viability of other types of mainstream Black cinematic expression” (33). She also criticized what she saw as a new trend of objectifying women, particularly black women, as “bitches” or “hos” (36). Her conclusion was that, as in the 1970s, the black experience was once again being converted into a commodity—a surface image with no real engagement with the problems that the films purported to illuminate. Of course, Jones’ critique represents, at this point in the cycle’s life, a minority stance; most critics, black and white, were praising the film.

Likewise, her views, published in an academic journal with a limited readership, would not have reached the mainstream audience.

While the blaxploitation cycle came to an end as a result of the formation of coalitions, including CAB, PUSH and BANG, as well as press conferences deriding the damaging stereotypes propagated by these films, the ghetto action cycle likewise endured this type of backlash, albeit on a much smaller scale. For instance, in the summer of 1991 a coalition of “diverse mainstream black groups” calling themselves the Coalition Against Media Racism in America (CAMRA), began a boycott of films like *New Jack City*, *Boyz N the Hood*, *Jungle Fever* (1991, Spike Lee), and others, stating the recent “spate of violent, stereotypic and inflammatory films may give the summer of 1991 the dubious distinction of launching the second era of Blaxploitation movies...” (qtd. in Ptacek “Coalition of Black Groups”). Thus, as early as 1991, the ghetto action cycle was gaining a somewhat negative reputation. For example, in July of 1991 the *Hollywood Reporter* reported that Fine Line Features, decided to delay the national release of their film, *Hangin’ with the Homeboys* (1991, Joseph Vasquez), a “a low budget, music-filled comedy,” for fear that it might be confused with the ghetto action cycle. Fine Line’s president Ira Deutchman noted that research showed that “the public is having an awfully tough time differentiating between all the black based films”(qtd. in Toumarkine).

By 1993 the ghetto action cycle’s negative images were pervasive enough to provoke Kalamu ya Salaam’s piece “Black Macho: The Myth of the Positive Message” in *The Black Film Review*, in which he criticizes the state of contemporary black cinema. His critique mirrors, almost verbatim, the criticism of blaxploitation films expressed by the Kuumba Workshop over 30 years earlier:

Black audiences have been so starved for 'positive' Black images on the one hand and so conditioned by the status quo on the other that they presently accept film images of status quo morality as positive as long as the movie stars are Black. Unfortunately, simply replacing whites with Blacks while otherwise leaving the cinema syntax intact assures that sexual and economic exploitation will continue.

Salaam also argues that despite their touted aims, ghetto action films cannot be revolutionary since they always posit an individualist and capitalist solution to the problems facing the contemporary black community. Likewise, the cover story of *Black Enterprise* in 1994 was Mark Lowery's "The Making of 'Hollywood'," which, while less vituperative than Salaam's piece, nevertheless questions why the most successful examples of the new black film boom must deal with themes of violence in the 'hood and black men as criminals. Lowery quotes one industry insider who explains that "These films are valuable because they're inexpensive and there is a clearly defined audience for [them]."

Again these critiques are limited mostly to academic circles (i.e., the readers of journals like *Black Film Review* and *Wide Angle*) or to niche audiences (i.e., the readers of *Black Enterprise*) and therefore would not have penetrated a mainstream audience. Rather, critiques of the cycle came in fits and starts. It wasn't until the aforementioned theater violence plagued three prominent ghetto action releases (*New Jack City*, *Boyz N the Hood*, *Juice*) that a more "mainstream" critique of the cycle began to appear. Therefore, the release of *Juice* in 1992, much like the release of *Superfly* in 1972, marks the first time that the mainstream press began to view ghetto action films as violent "hood" films (as opposed to part of the more general "black film boom") and began to question the images of blackness that they were presenting. Though many articles analyzing theater violence and its links to film content appeared after the release of *New*

*Jack City* and *Boyz N the Hood*, *Juice* provided the critical mass necessary for a spate of reactions in the media. A review of *Juice* in the *Chicago Citizen*, for example, praises the film as being “definitely anti-violence,” but concludes with a brief editorial about the recent epidemic of theater violence (the most publicized of which had occurred in Chicago): “Why young black men continue to talk in a cloud of confusion and show up at such movies with gun in hand and attitude on sleeve continues to amaze me...In the light of recent disturbances all that can be said is pick out a nice theater and be careful” (Boseman 17). In this article theater violence is explicitly linked with black male youths and readers are warned that in order to safely view the film they should seek out a “nice” theater, that is, presumably, a theater *not* located in a black neighborhood.<sup>217</sup>

Most articles and editorials on this subject make several dangerous assumptions: that the violence in ghetto action films was somehow more dangerous than the violence of contemporaneous “white” action films (“Curbing” A20), that black audiences naturally “relate” to violent or aggressive images since these images allegedly reflect their own real world experiences (whereas white action films are simply too unrealistic for any white viewer to relate to them), and that, as a result, black audiences are compelled to imitate the violence they see on screen. For example, Ken Smikle, president of Target Market News and the African American

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<sup>217</sup> Note to reader: At this point I have been unable to determine the racial make up of all of the neighborhoods surrounding theaters where violence occurred for *Boyz N the Hood* and *Juice*. I know, for example, that neither Pinole, CA, where violence was reported at a screening of *Boyz N the Hood*, nor East Lansing, Michigan, where violence was reported at the Lansing Mall, are predominantly black neighborhoods. However, both the Chicago suburb of Riverdale, where violence was also reported at a screening of *Boyz N the Hood* at the Halsted Twin Outdoor Theater, and the Cheltenham suburb of Philadelphia, where violence was reported at a screening of *Juice*, do have a large black population. I imagine that there is no correlation between outbreaks of violence and the racial make up of a particular neighborhood. This makes sense since, as I will be arguing, the individuals primarily responsible for these incidents, gang members, often had to travel to *other* neighborhood theaters since there are not many theaters located in the inner city (“Streetwise Film”). In fact, one exhibitor interviewed in the midst of the theater violence scandal explained “What you’re seeing is symptomatic of a broader society, and I don’t think we [exhibitors] can solve it. These incidents are isolated but they seem to have the ability to happen everywhere” (qtd. in Ptacek “Despite violence”).

Marketing and Media Association was troubled by *Juice*'s campaign because of the film's alleged basis in reality "The images that you see in a 'Lethal Weapon' where the good guys and bad guys are clearly defined and played out in only what can be called imaginary situations is a lot different from taking a slice of violent urban life, magnifying it 100 times and then replaying it 1,000 times as a television commercial" (qtd. in Busch "Paramount Marketing"). Next, as I mentioned, the perpetrators of violence at these screenings—primarily gang members—were frequently collapsed in mainstream discourses with the black community as a whole, leading to the impression that black audiences (as opposed to gang members) simply cannot handle watching violent films. For example, a *New York Times* editorial appearing shortly after *Juice*'s release provides a well reasoned explanation of why there was violence at screenings of *Juice*—its inflammatory ad campaign. However, the author goes on to make a generalized statement about the film's audience when s/he writes that "Similar things could be said of other violent films like *Terminator 2* or the latest installment of *Nightmare on Elm Street*. But those unrealistic films don't draw gun-toting moviegoers. The difference is that *Juice* and its cousins dwell on specific forms of violence that their audiences know well and even participate in" ("Curbing" A20). Likewise, a short piece in the *New Pittsburgh Courier*, "'Juice' Violence: By-Product of Films," provides a quote from Dr. Sharon Nelson-LeGall, professor of psychology at the University of Pittsburgh: "It's not that there is more violence in these movies; it's that people can relate to what they are seeing on the screen. Some of these inner-city youths might not be gang members or drug dealers, but chances are they probably know someone who is. Being able to relate, sometimes, generates those reactions" (Carlisle A1). In both articles there is an explicit assumption that being a black inner city resident would make a filmgoer more likely to imitate violence depicted in a fictional text.

From a survey of the coverage of these outbreaks of theater violence, several conclusions can be drawn. First, films like *Boyz N the Hood* and *Juice* are not extraordinarily violent, at least by contemporary Hollywood standards. *Boyz N the Hood*, for example, contains only one on-screen death, and alludes to several others (two dead bodies appear on screen and the epilogue explains that Doughboy is killed, etc). Instead, it was the way in which these films were *promoted* that led to the general consensus that they were extraordinarily violent. Janet Maslin makes the point that “Whenever a movie arrives amid a blizzard of attendant news stories, its message tends to be distorted and oversimplified, a process that in the case of ‘Juice’ has proved more dangerous than usual” (C13). Second, it appears that the violent content found in ghetto action films were *not* the primary factors motivating viewers to shoot and stab one another since many of these violent incidents took place outside of movie theaters, *prior* to the screening of the films (“Streetwise Film”). Rather these films, which were misleadingly promoted *as* violent films, attracted a larger than usual crowd of gang members to some theaters. Likewise, since most exhibitors are reluctant to open theater chains in inner cities, city-dwelling gang members must travel outside of their own turf in order to see new releases (“‘Boyz N the Hood’ Boosts Debate”). These gang members, anticipating that gang members from other territories might also be attending the same film, armed themselves accordingly. As one Hollywood insider reasoned “Clearly, when a film draws kids in gangs, rival gangs will show up at the theater, and tension will result” (Leach A30). Consequently, what is at issue here is not whether or not these ghetto action films were especially violent or especially realistic. What stands out, rather, is the fact that marketers *believed* that the only way to sell these films to a mainstream audience was to promote their most violent moments; that the “truth” of the inner city was not that individuals were grappling daily with the fundamental struggle between right

and wrong, between reason and violence, but that they were simply shooting each other, willy-nilly, in the streets, accompanied by the latest rap soundtrack. And this marketing campaign inadvertently acted as a self fulfilling prophecy.

While the initial backlash against blaxploitation was grounded in the belief that films like *Sweetback* and *Superfly* presented unrealistic, hyper-violent, hyper-sexual images of black masculinity as realistic representations of the contemporary black community, potentially affecting both the way mainstream society viewed the black community as well as the type of black films that would be produced in the future, the initial backlash against the ghetto action cycle, while also rooted in its stereotyped images of blackness, was somewhat different. Not counting the critiques offered within academic journals, the general response to early ghetto action films was that they *were* a realistic reflection of inner city life and that such films were needed, given the dire state of the contemporary city. Furthermore, in order to lure in audiences eager for a movie going experience so authentic that “real” bodily harm was a possibility, the marketers behind the ghetto action cycle cultivated an association between the violent black males depicted on screen and the supposedly violent black males seated in the movie audience. This association between real life and reel life eventually became a liability when reporters, film critics, and various “experts” began objecting to this film cycle and the type of audiences it presumably attracted to the theaters. There was a perceptible fear in the media that these images were somehow “too realistic,” that they were so powerful and incendiary that audiences, specifically black audiences, would be moved to commit violence after seeing the films.

Paramount’s aforementioned decision to remove an image of a pistol from early versions of *Juice*’s promotional posters highlights contemporary fears over black male youth and violence. Charles Richardson, president of Tri-Ad Communications Group, which advises

studios and corporations on how to market to the black population, was interviewed in *The Wall Street Journal* about the *Juice* poster controversy and stated “The ad art implies danger to me. It suggests to me a characterization of black male youths that in New York’s current racial climate is of questionable value” (qtd. in King B6). This need to police the black audience dates back to the widespread fears that race films, such as *Within Our Gates* (1920, Oscar Micheaux), might incite their target audience. As Jane Gaines has noted:

[Race films] had to be historically censored because the black bodies exposed to it could, by means of mimic operations, carry the images they saw into the streets. What was believed was that through the incorporation of the image into the black body, the criminal violence (coupled with taboo sexuality) on the screen would be replicated in the wider society. The black body, in its remarkable capacity to reproduce images, then, is not only the screen but the projector as well. (252).

Similarly, the “hook” deployed to sell the ghetto action cycle—the promise of an urban reality so authentic that it could convert its audience into criminals and murderers—is what ultimately led to the backlash against these films. Charles Richardson, quoted above, alludes to the “instability” of the urban black audience: “When I saw the poster I was stunned. This is six to seven months after ‘Boyz’ and we all saw what happened there. Given a city like New York, there is so much racial tension here. And this ad art is in New York transit areas and in the subways?” (qtd. in Busch “Paramount Marketing”). Richardson’s implication is that studios must be more “careful” when catering to the black audience. As one black marketer (who wished to remain anonymous in a statement to the *Hollywood Reporter*) put it “I think that they [Paramount] have seized the lowest common denominator to sell tickets. Given the history of

films in this genre, I think their approach is exploitative. It's pure greed. It's not responsible" (qtd. in Busch "Paramount Marketing").

By 1993, the consensus of the popular press, as well the black press and black directors, was that the ghetto action cycle was becoming clichéd and exploitative. For example, a review of John Singleton's *Poetic Justice* (1993) in *The New York Amsterdam News* (an historically black newspaper), urges viewers to see the film because it dares to "expose raw Black emotions that go beyond 9MM street justice" (Rogers 23). The reporter quotes a viewer: "Another guy (who didn't realize he was complimenting the film) commented that *Poetic Justice* was no *New Jack City*" (23). And in a 1993 interview in the *Afro-American Red Star*, John Singleton complains about the numerous 'hood films which followed in the wake of *Boyz N the Hood* "Since *Boyz N the Hood*'s success there have been other films that have tried to emulate its success...They're written and produced by people who have read about certain things and they haven't seen or felt those things...These people are just in it for the money and their work shows it" (Smith B7). A 1993 *Jet* piece on Mario Van Peebles' new film, *Posse*, marks the first time that the magazine transitioned from cheerleading the black film boom, to addressing some of its potential problems. In the interview Mario Van Peebles complained that after making *New Jack City* he could not get financing for a film about a middle class black family because he was told that "You got to have one of the kids living in the 'hood.' I said that I couldn't do that project and walked away" (58). And in the aforementioned *Washington Post* interview with the Allen and Albert Hughes, the filmmakers address this criticism, indicating by mid-1993 the backlash had reached a critical mass. Albert complains: "You know, a lot of [blacks] are screaming and yelling that they want 'positive' movies out there about family life. But they're the first ones out

on Memorial Day spending \$20 million on a movie about killing people—*Cliffhanger*”<sup>218</sup> while his brother adds “We’re filmmakers, not politicians” (qtd. in French G4). By 1994, many reviews of black cast films, like *Sugar Hill* (1994, Leon Ichaso), *The Inkwell* (1994, Matty Rich), and *Fresh* (1994, Boaz Yakin), reference the problematic glut of violent ghetto action films, and how these new releases act as antidote to those previous films (*Fresh*, *The Inkwell*) or as a perpetuation of their violent themes (*Sugar Hill*).<sup>219</sup>

In addition to concern over the links between the cycle and real life violence and the consequent backlash from critics, reviewers, activists and industry insiders, it appears that the ghetto action cycle’s demise was also strongly enacted by the imagery of the cycle itself. As I argued in Chapter 2, audiences were cued that the cinematic images of the ghetto action cycle were no longer “authentic” or hip via other cinematic images. The release of *Friday* in 1995, which made the problems of the ghetto a source of light-hearted comedy, and *Don’t Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking your Juice in the Hood* (Paris Barclay) in 1996, which overtly lampooned the original cycle, essentially demystified the imagery of the ghetto action cycle. As Shawn Wayans, who plays Ash-Trey in the latter film, explained in a *Jet* interview published a month after the film’s release, “We started seeing the similarities in these films, the clichés in the themes and their sometime comic nature even if not intentional...people like to laugh, and whenever a genre, like ‘hood movies, plays itself out, that’s when it’s time for a parody” (“Wayans Brothers”). In addition to indicating that the images of the ghetto action cycle

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<sup>218</sup> Carol Speed noticed a similar hypocrisy in the reception of the blaxploitation cycle: “[the NAACP, CORE and the SCLC] came in and said ‘Look at what you’re doing to our people.’ But they never said anything to Clint Eastwood, with his big guns and his ‘make my day.’ Eastwood was making violent films that Black kids were going to see and nobody said a word to him about it” (qtd. in Martinez 171).

<sup>219</sup> See “What’s the Buzz? Lights, camera, talk, but no action” in *Call and Post*, “‘Sugar Hill’: Same old story to take your money, honey” in *New York Amsterdam News*, “The Revolution Just May Be Televised” in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, “Young Black Film Makers Face the Aftermath of Success” in *The New York Times*, “‘Fresh’: Disturbing, powerful, well-acted ghetto film” in *New York Amsterdam News*.

had fully saturated the mainstream and were therefore ripe for comedic treatment, this film also revealed how these images were inadequate for encompassing the realities of the contemporary black experience. This film, despite its surface frivolity, is a commentary on the representation of black males on film in the 1990s, namely that these violent, hyperbolic characters were far more dangerous to black males than any violence these images were presumed to generate in the movie theater audiences.

#### 4.4 CONCLUSIONS: MODERN MINSTRELS OR SOCIAL CRITICS?

In 2005, comedian Dave Chappelle shocked his fans and colleagues when he abruptly ceased filming the third season of his wildly popular sketch comedy show, *Chappelle's Show* (2003-2006), in order to flee to South Africa. Though it is unclear what, exactly, Chappelle was doing in South Africa (the most common story being that he checked himself into a mental health facility), his reasons for leaving his show were articulated quite clearly by the comedian himself. In interviews on the Oprah Winfrey show, Anderson Cooper's *360*, James Lipton's *Inside the Actor's Studio*, and in publications like *Time* and *Entertainment Weekly*, among others,<sup>220</sup> Chappelle claimed that he was unhappy with the direction that his show, which was almost universally lauded for its cutting edge critique of American race relations, was heading. Sketches like "The Nigger Family" (a spoof sitcom set in the 1950s about a white family that happens to have the last name of "Nigger") and "The Black White Supremacist" (about a blind white supremacist who does not realize that he is an African American), certainly walked the tightrope

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<sup>220</sup> Chappelle was interviewed by Oprah Winfrey on February 3, 2006, by *Inside the Actor's Studio's* James Lipton on February 12, 2006 and by *360's* Anderson Cooper on July 7, 2006. Also see "On the Beach with Dave Chappelle," in *Time* and "Durban Renewal" in *Entertainment Weekly*.

between incisive critique of the state of American race relations and the reinforcement of racial stereotypes. However, it was one sketch in particular, entitled “The Nigger Pixie,” that forced Chappelle to reconsider whether the comedy he was doing was socially responsible or not. In this sketch Chappelle portrayed a series of “devil-on-the-shoulder” pixies who were supposed to represent the embodiment of racist stereotypes that whites, blacks, Asians and Latinos allegedly harbor within themselves. During the filming of the “nigger pixie” sequence, in which Chappelle donned blackface, white painted lips, white gloves and a Pullman Porter cap, a white crew member began to laugh. Chappelle later recalled in an interview with Oprah Winfrey that “it was the first time I felt that someone was not laughing with me but laughing at me.” So while the racially charged skits featured on *Chappelle’s Show* had been generating laughter for two seasons, it was this particular laugh (a “racist” laugh perhaps?) that made Chappelle question the images he was creating. He later told CNN’s Anderson Cooper “The way he laughed, made me feel like this guy’s laughing for the wrong reasons.” Like Bert Williams’ blackface performances, Chappelle’s use of blackface was intended as an exaggeration of stereotypes placed upon the black community from the outside. Indeed, the sketch was a critique of that imagery and the way racist stereotypes haunt all Americans when they find themselves in situations in which stereotyped behavior is expected of them.<sup>221</sup> However, Chappelle discovered, in that moment, that his imagery was being misread, his intentions twisted, bending his critique to the desires of racism. Or so he feared—it was never determined what the aforementioned crew member was really laughing at.

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<sup>221</sup> The sketch also featured a “white pixie” who admits to preferring a woman with a “pancake butt” (a flat posterior) and to doing “The Twist” when out at a club with some black friends, an “Asian pixie” who desperately wants to replace his L’s with R’s at an upscale cocktail party hosted by Americans, and a “Latino pixie” who wants to purchase leopard-skin seat covers and a Jesus air freshener for his Hyundai.

Dave Chappelle's fears over how his imagery would be received, that his jokes would generate not just laughter, but the *right kind* of laughter, highlights the impossibility of controlling images once they are released into the wild. The irony of Chappelle's situation is that the imagery he created was intended to be progressive, to skewer the racial prejudices of whites, blacks, Asians and Latinos, and to make viewers uncomfortable with the recognition of their own buried racism,<sup>222</sup> and yet it is precisely this kind of imagery that is so easily misread. While the general reception of *Chappelle's Show* was that it was politically progressive, with critics like the *New York Press*' Armond White claiming that the show was adept in "subverting racism, sexism, and the clichés you might call blackism" (qtd. in Feeney), a minority of critics argued that Chappelle's work was less political than it was low brow and racist. For example, Matt Feeney of *Slate.com* counters White's claims, arguing "But Chappelle doesn't 'subvert' these things—he exploits them." Chappelle could have made images of racial "uplift," images that could not possibly be misconstrued, however, such safe images lack the critical power found in the show's ribald humor (and, for a comedy show, such images probably would not have been very funny). The complexity of this dilemma is what drove Chappelle to abandon his show and his staggering \$50 million contract with Comedy Central. There is a fine line between exploring racial stereotypes and exploiting them, or as Chappelle himself put it "I want to make sure I'm dancing and not shuffling" (qtd. in Farley).

We can see a similar dilemma with directors like Melvin Van Peebles and John Singleton, who, even as they acknowledged their desire to profit from the images of blackness

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<sup>222</sup> For example in a September 3, 2004 interview on Anderson Cooper's *360*, Chappelle was asked if there was anything he *would not* talk about in his comedy. Chappelle replied "I think, in general, people get weird about talking about race, but I think there's something refreshing about talking about it. It's so interwoven into the fabric of what our society is, but it's just like this unspoken thing, where someone would desperately trying to get past. But then, how do you get past it if nobody wants to talk about it?"

they created in their films, also felt that these films were somehow important to the black community and for society at large. Van Peebles felt that his film was about a character who thumbed his nose at society and got away with it while Singleton argued that his film was about enlightening his generation about the importance of nonviolence and an education. And both filmmakers felt that they were offering an image of black reality as they knew it to counter those images created by white filmmakers. They were, like Bert Williams, claiming authority over the representation of African Americans. And like Williams, both filmmakers initially aimed these representations at smaller, more niche audiences, audiences they felt would “get” what they were trying to do. However, in all of these cases, these black performances were soon embraced by a wider audience, which, in turn, greatly affected the ability of these performances to critique and reflect upon black stereotypes. Louis Chude-Sokei explains that as Bert Williams’ audience changed from the integrated audiences found in vaudeville theaters to the primarily white audiences of the Ziegfeld Follies:

[Williams] suddenly found himself no longer a surrogate for a black audience who assumed the humanity behind the mask but now exclusively a victim of a gaze skeptical of that humanity and which needed to be convinced of it. In short, the semantic field shifted and the line between the ironic and the literal threatened to evaporate as he approached closer and closer to the light of megastardom. (24)

Like Williams’ Jim Crow characters, Van Peebles’ Sweetback and Singleton’s Dougboy became commodities whose meanings could no longer be controlled once their target audience expanded to become broader. Despite the filmmaker’s intentions, these images could be used in whatever fashion to support whatever claims about race that the audience (black, white, or otherwise) desired. As the controversy over *Chappelle’s Show* indicates, it is difficult to control

an image, particularly when that image is intended to address issues of race, once it leaves the artist's hands. And once a filmmaker or a comedian gains some notoriety or financial success for creating these images of racial difference, the term "exploitation" will most likely rear its ugly head. It seems that the popularity of these films, and later, their expansion into a film cycle, is what eventually made these images so problematic for so many people. Had these films remained marginal and unpopular then might their revolutionary, subversive spirit remain intact? Does the very process of success and/or cycle formation retroactively alter the meanings of such commodities? As I have been arguing, the answer appears to be yes.

Few contemporary, mainstream black cast films have dealt with themes of sex, drugs and violence as they appeared in blaxploitation and ghetto action cycles. Instead, these images have been relegated to the world of direct to DVD releases. It is interesting that the D2D market gratefully pulled the scraps of this dismembered cycle from the metaphorical garbage can of popular culture. As I mentioned, after the initial backlash against blaxploitation began to make headlines around 1972, mainstream studios essentially stopped making the films, while independents like A.I.P. and Allied Artists continued to churn out and profit from blaxploitation titles. Therefore it is not surprising that the D2D market of the 1990s is likewise latched onto a cycle which the mainstream no longer wished to exploit. It is my belief that because the products of these production companies are always already considered "low brow," because viewers have no expectations about "quality" of the films' production values, narrative, acting, or even its morality, independent producers essentially have *carte blanche* in what they decide to release. There is no uproar about the negative imagery found in ghetto action derivatives like *Jack Movez* (2003, Ed and Jose Quiroz) or *Hood of the Living Dead* (2005, Ed and Jose Quiroz). There is, however, one more media location in which the imagery of the blaxploitation and ghetto action

cycles can still be found, the contemporary hip hop video, an arena in which these so-called exploitative images can not only thrive, but in which they are expected and encouraged. In my final chapter I will address this phenomenon and why these images of criminality and sexuality are deemed acceptable in the world of hip hop, but not in mainstream film or sketch comedy.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION: LAST STOP, THE MUSIC VIDEO

“The ‘eye’ is a product of history reproduced by education,” (Bourdieu 3).

In previous chapters, I devoted some time to discussing one contemporary depository of the ghetto action cycle’s images and themes—the direct to DVD release. I argued that, much as the Eastside Kids cycle of the 1940s and juvenile delinquent themed teenpic cycles of the 1950s exploited the popularity of two film cycles originating in “prestige” pictures like *Dead End* (1937, William Wyler) and *Rebel without a Cause* (1955, Nicholas Ray), respectively, direct to DVD releases of the 1990s and 2000s, including *Hood of the Living Dead* (2005, Ed and Jose Quiroz) and *Gang of Roses* (2003, Jean-Claude La Marre), are currently exploiting the popularity of the original ghetto action cycle. While D2D releases represent one thriving, albeit marginalized, expression of the ghetto action cycle, there is another, more visible manifestation of its themes and images: the hip hop music video. Therefore it should not be surprising that music videos have several parallels with the exploitation film: videos emphasize the timely, the sensational and the controversial,<sup>223</sup> they overtly display their desire to sell a product (the music video is essentially a three to four minute commercial for an artist, a single, an album, a motion

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<sup>223</sup> See, for example, the controversies over Duran Duran’s “Girls on Film” (1983) (the first music video to be banned), George Michael’s “I Want Your Sex” (1987), Madonna’s “Like a Prayer” (1989), “Justify My Love” (1990) and “American Life” (2003), Nine Inch Nails’ “Closer to God” (1994), etc. As with exploitation films, music videos often contain controversial content in order to draw in viewers, a tactic that has served artists like Madonna particularly well.

picture, etc.) and are they relatively inexpensive to produce.<sup>224</sup> Furthermore, just as B films and exploitation films provided unknown directors with opportunities to cut their directing teeth, music videos have long been viewed as a training ground for feature film directors, especially for directors of the ghetto action cycle; the biographies of ghetto action film directors like Allen and Albert Hughes (*Menace II Society* [1993]), F. Gary Gray (*Friday* [1995], *Set it Off* [1996]) and others all cite their experience with directing music videos. But despite its ties to exploitation production practices, the music video does not carry the same stigma as the D2D release or the B film. While established studio directors like John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock would not have been expected to squander their talents on a low budget B film during the studio system, many established directors, including John Landis (“Thriller” [1983], “Black or White” [1991]), Martin Scorsese (“Bad” [1987]) and Brett Ratner (“Beautiful Stranger” [1999], “Heartbreaker” [1999]), have all directed music videos in the midst of directing mainstream Hollywood films. Furthermore, unlike D2D releases, music videos often employ high production values and increasingly rely upon star cameos.

## **5.1 READING THE GHETTO ACTION CYCLE THROUGH THE PARADIGM OF THE MUSIC VIDEO**

In the frame of the hip hop music video, the ghetto action cycle is free to indulge in and exploit the very elements which led to its demonization and disappearance from mainstream theatrical releases: the objectification and subordination of women (Juvenile’s “Back That Azz Up”

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<sup>224</sup> On average, a four minute music video only costs about \$125,000 to produce (Hewitt).

[2004]), the glamorization of drug use and/or participation in the drug economy (Snoop Doggy Dogg's "Gin and Juice" [1993]), the depiction of young black males as hyperviolent and threatening (Nas' "Thief's Theme" [2004]) or overly materialistic (50 Cent's "P.I.M.P." [2003]), and the fetishization of a poverty stricken urban *mise en scène* (Jay-Z's "99 Problems" [2005]). While one of the main causes behind the original ghetto action cycle's demise was its reliance on stereotypes of black masculinity which became offensive, unbelievable and potentially dangerous after too much repetition, the hip hop music video is a medium which *thrives* on stereotypes and readily accessible symbols. Much like a poem, the music video must convey its story or concept in a brief (often less than four minutes), but rhythmic format, and so its imagery tends to be both dense and highly symbolic, requiring multiple "readings" in order to grasp the fullness of its discourse. The music video is therefore a useful place to conclude a discussion of the ghetto action cycle since it also makes meaning primarily through the deployment of dense imagery. In fact, the discarded stereotypes and clichés of the ghetto action cycle, which convey a wealth of meanings and connotations in an instant, are invaluable to the music video format. In this way, the music video becomes the logical endpoint of the ghetto action film—the point at which these semantic and syntactic elements have become so rich and multilayered that they can exist in a framework that does not require a formal narrative in order to make meaning. The images of hip hop video only need to appear for a moment in order to register their meanings with their target viewers.<sup>225</sup> When watching contemporary hip hop videos, fans of the original ghetto action cycle should be able to detect its imagery and themes, albeit in a highly distilled form. For example, many hip hop videos contain the rise and fall narrative of the classic cycle of

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<sup>225</sup> A recent survey (February 2007) conducted by the Black Youth Project found that 58 % black youth (ages 15 to 25) listen to rap music everyday. 45% of Hispanic youth and 23% of white youth listen to rap music daily. Thus, the majority of the audience for rap music is comprised of white youth (Cohen, et al).

the gangster film (Notorious B.I.G.'s "Juicy" [1994]), the examination of urban poverty and violence central to the social problem film (Ludacris' "Runaway Love" [2007]), the exposure and promotion of new, youthful trends found in the 1950s teenpic (Nelly's "Grillz" [2005]), and the fetishization with masculine sexuality, style and bravado indicative of the blaxploitation cycle (Snoop Doggy Dogg's "That's That" [2006]).

The world depicted in the hip hop video is a carefully crafted reflection of and mediation on the ways in which hip hop culture is understood by both its target consumer market (youth) and the culture at large. As I will argue, hip hop, particularly gangsta rap, is and always has been tied to the concept of authenticity, with this term being alternately defined as: coming from the streets, that is, from a primarily black, working class neighborhood, empathizing with the plight of the black underclass and the plight of black America in general, building a reputation by engaging in local competitions and performances, and developing a local "flavor." Nevertheless, today, with the widespread popularity of rap music and the proliferation of studio-created, rather than "street created" rappers, there is an underlying fear in the industry that rap music, as one of the most celebrated examples of contemporary black culture, will soon become as insignificant and disposable as any studio-created pop album. And while many major rap labels, such as Def Jam, Aftermath, Roc-A-Fella and Death Row, are run by black producers, there is nevertheless a growing concern over white control of the rap industry in the one area that counts the most—who gets the money. In this way, the history of rap music is threatening to turn into the history of rock n' roll; there is a fear that African Americans will completely lose possession of an art form they originated and nurtured. As a result of these numerous converging factors, many contemporary rap tracks and their accompanying videos are crafted to recreate an aura of "lost" authenticity, which was perceived to exist at some point in the history of rap

music, but which has vanished due to its rampant commercialization. Although the ghetto action cycle was never truly authentic, in hindsight this period of black cultural production (approximately 1991-1996) has come to be viewed as an “authentic” moment, a time when gangsta rap was still considered “dangerous,” revolutionary and disruptive to the hegemony of white, middle class value systems. And so rappers looking to recreate this feeling of authenticity frequently invoke this period of black cultural production—often by deploying the themes, imagery, plots and overall sensibilities of the ghetto action cycle in their videos and song lyrics—as a method for recognizing and recovering this presumably lost authenticity.

Of course, whether or not gangsta rap is representative of authentic, urban black experiences is not the concern of this chapter. Indeed, Eric Watts has argued that such a debate makes little sense in the context of the genre since “The hyper-reality and hyperbole of gangsta rap is constitutive of dynamic exchange relationships that make moot nearly all discussions of what is ‘real’” (601). Rather my primary concern is with how, throughout the 1990s, authenticity was the primary marketing hook used to *sell* rap music and how exactly, that authenticity was defined for and understood by consumers of rap music. I will demonstrate how this emphasis on authenticity mirrors the marketing campaign of the ghetto action cycle. As I argued in chapter 4, once producers realized that audiences were attracted to rather than repelled by the outbreaks of theater violence accompanying the screenings of *Boyz N the Hood* (1991, John Singleton) and *New Jack City* (1991, Mario Van Peebles), consequent marketing campaigns for films like *Juice* (1992, Ernest R. Dickerson) and *Menace II Society*, among others, highlighted their films’ focus on authentic street life (which was associated with violence, criminality and masculine posturing). Therefore, it should not be surprising that the images of the ghetto action cycle—

which were, in turn, culled from the images generated by early 1990s gangsta rap—can now be deployed again as signifiers of ghetto authenticity.

Before moving on to discuss one specific example of the contemporary “nostalgic” hip hop video, it is necessary to briefly delineate some of the key ways that the music video functions. While it is tempting to apply the reading strategies developed by the discipline of film studies to the music video text, scholars like Andrew Goodwin and Carol Vernallis argue that videos function differently from cinema and television (and any other form of visual media for that matter) and therefore require slightly different analytical tools and perspectives. First, when reading a music video it is necessary to understand that it exists primarily for the promotion of a particular music product: a single, an album, a performer(s), but also, occasionally, a film (if the single is attached to a film that is currently playing in theaters), a clothing line, or consumer products: “Music video clips must be contextualized within a framework that explains the role of pop performances in terms of their essentially *promotional* role within a multidiscursive industry” (Goodwin 27). For example, in addition to her musical career, pop singer Gwen Stefani has developed her own line of high end designer clothing, known as L.A.M.B. (which is also, conveniently, the title of her first solo album, *Love.Angel.Music.Baby*. [2004]). In recent music videos, including “Wind it Up” (2006), Stefani wears pieces from her L.A.M.B. line and name checks them in the song’s lyrics “They like the way we dance, they like the way we work/They like that way that L.A.M.B. is going across my shirt.” In fact, it is becoming increasingly common for artists to include product placements in their videos.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> For example, Hewlett Packard recently paid to place some of its newest high-end products in Jessica Simpson’s video, “Public Affair” (2006).

In addition to promoting the single, the album and the artist, the hip hop video text likewise promotes the ongoing presence, viability and authenticity of hip hop culture in all of its various manifestations. Most hip hop videos are highly aware of hip hop's central role in the popular culture landscape and therefore display (and "sell") this awareness through: an emphasis on the sexual virility (both male and female), lyrical expertise and moneymaking capabilities of the performer(s), an emphasis on the collaborative nature of the hip hop community (via cameos by other prominent rappers), a fetishization of new fashion trends or commodities (i.e., the 2006 craze for "grillz"), and references to the performer's links with other musical projects and/or commercial endeavors (most commonly a clothing line). When watching these videos the viewer is given a sense of a powerful community of individuals who are always already adored by fans and who are wildly successful at what they do. Only a few of the more "quirky" hip hop artists, such as Ludacris, Missy Elliott, Eminem, OutKast and Kanye West, deviate from this standard template in their videos. Their stylistic differences make sense, however, since these artists are all marketed based on their idiosyncratic sound and lyrics, on their *difference* from other contemporary hip hop artists.

When reading music videos it is also important to keep in mind that, unlike film or television programs, the music video exists to illustrate a song, encoding the feelings, moods and images implicitly or explicitly found within that song (Goodwin 49). Rather than *generating* the sounds we hear, the video exists to *illustrate* them. For example, in a film we see a character clap and we consequently hear a clapping sound on the soundtrack, but in the music video the image of a clapping character appears to *visualize* the sound of clapping in the song. In this way the music video reverses the conventional emphasis of visuals over sound found in most conventional Hollywood films. Of course, a music video can also be somewhat autonomous

from the song; in some videos the promotion of other commodities (such as the inclusion of clips from a feature film in which the song will appear) overtakes the significance of the song itself, or the visualization of a song may go beyond its meaning or even contradict it (Goodwin 85).<sup>227</sup> In any case, the images in the music video must always be read dialectically in relation to the song lyrics as well as the performer's star persona. If a viewer becomes too absorbed in the visual imagery of a video to the detriment of the song, then the video has failed in its primary goal: "A single can exist (technically, at least) without the video, but the reverse is not the case...However bizarre or disruptive videos appear, they never challenge or emancipate themselves from their musical foundation, without which their charismatic indulgences would never reach our eyes" (Berland 25). A successful music video will always lead the viewer/listener back to his/her ears, to concentrating on what is heard rather than what is seen.

It is for this reason, as well their brief format, that music videos rarely aim to convey a complicated narrative.<sup>228</sup> As Carol Vernallis puts it, music videos create "peaks of interest" as opposed to narratives with a coherent beginning, middle and end. When a video does attempt to construct a coherent story, it must remain relatively simple (13). For example Weezer's "Perfect Situation" (2006) recounts the band's "false" history: the lead singer of Weezer (Elisha Cuthbert), a mythical band predating the "real" Weezer, is egotistical and out of control. As a result, she loses her position as lead singer and is replaced by the band's modest roadie (Weezer's actual lead singer, Rivers Cuomo), a move which makes Weezer, the band we

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<sup>227</sup> For example, the music video for the Ludacris single "Saturday (Ooh Ooh!)" (2001) has little to do with the song it is meant to illustrate. The song is about a night on the town in which the narrator is smoking marijuana and flashing his money around (sample lyrics include "It's illegal but the plants in my backyard grow, that's my buds/ Smoke 'til ya drop out, that's my luck/Keep a couple rolled and I hit the club in the back door, nigga what?"). However, in order to get into high rotation on video channels like MTV and BET, the video cannot contain many overt images of drug use. Therefore the video for "Saturday (Ooh Ooh!)" is a comical exaggeration of the narrator's poverty-stricken, rural home life in Georgia.

<sup>228</sup> A few musicians have attempted to tell lengthy stories with their music videos, the most famous being Michael Jackson's "Thriller" (1984), a thirteen minute video which cost approximately \$800,000 to produce.

do not recognize, into Weezer, the band we know and love. Because characters in a video are rarely given a chance to speak (though some videos open with character dialogue or “pause” the song in order to allow for some dialogue), narrative events must be conveyed via gesticulation or “ham acting” as well as signage (newspaper headlines, street signs, letters, and occasionally, even intertitles), in the manner of a silent film (Vernallis 6). The aforementioned video, for example, sets up its simple narrative with the intertitle “Before there was Weezer, there was Weeze.” We then see a poster advertising Weeze’s new album, with the band’s “fake” lead singer in the foreground. Similarly, Cuthbert’s replacement by Cuomo at the video’s conclusion is marked by a close up of a concert T-shirt vendor painstakingly adding an “r” to each of the “Weeze” T-shirts he is selling. Finally, much like a television commercial or a movie trailer, music videos must make use of temporal compression and condensation in order to communicate their narratives, no matter how simple they might be. In the Weezer video, the band’s annoyance with their lead singer is conveyed through a montage of brief shots depicting various narrative scenarios: Cuthbert throwing a tantrum upon finding a brown M & M in her bowl of green M & M’s; Cuthbert destroying the band’s after-party suite; Cuthbert dumping a bowl of punch on the head of one of her band mates and then laughing at him, etc. These brief bursts of narrative would not convey enough information in a film or even a television episode to make sense (or to be satisfying). However, by employing the clichéd imagery of the substance abusing, control freak lead singer, this video is able to communicate a (simple) story in an extremely brief amount of time. Likewise, the viewer of the music video has been conditioned to do some work while watching, to fill in some of the narrative holes on his/her own. In fact, music video imagery is constructed precisely to hold information back from the viewer, to be ambiguous, in order to incite viewers to construct the narrative (Vernallis 16-17) for themselves. On the whole,

however, music videos are primarily nonnarrative, seeking to consider or imply a topic or mood, rather than to enact it (Vernallis 3). In this way, music videos reflect the structure of the songs they are intended to illustrate—they are cyclical, episodic and repetitive, just like a pop song. In fact, many music videos will contain shots, such as the performer singing against a signature backdrop, which are repeated every time the song’s chorus plays, thereby training viewers to associate particular locales within a video with particular segments of the song.

Most mainstream films and television shows are designed for maximum intelligibility so that the viewer is able to grasp all key narrative points in one viewing. Classical Hollywood films in particular are designed so that the entire audience is able to follow the film’s narrative with little to no difficulty. By contrast, the music video is crafted in such a way that it would be difficult to comprehend all of its nuances in one viewing; it is designed for a high degree of repetition (Goodwin 61). The music video director crafts the text precisely so that viewers will request that the video be played again and again (on daily viewer request programs like MTV’s *Total Request Live* or BET’s *106 and Park*).<sup>229</sup> The longer a video has airplay on these programs, the more exposure it receives, and thus, the more albums it will presumably sell. This need for repeated viewings also explains why music videos avoid the continuity or invisible editing style of classical Hollywood cinema. If a music video were comprehensible and satisfying after its first viewing—which is the ultimate aim of the classical Hollywood editing style—then there would be no need to view it again. If this were the case, repeated viewings of a music video would eventually become boring and pointless. Thus, music videos usually employ a rapid editing style (hence the term “MTV-style editing”) composed of jump cuts, the cutting

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<sup>229</sup> Prior to development and widespread adoption of digital recording devices such as TiVo, viewers who wished to see their favorite new video would have to watch music videos for long stretches of time, hoping to catch a glimpse. Watching request programs upped the odds that you might see a popular new video.

together of movements which break the 180 degree rule, and other disruptive visual techniques (Vernallis 31) which serve to disorient the viewer, enticing him or her to view the video again and again. While all visual texts tend to benefit from multiple viewings, the music video is created with the understanding that it will be consumed several times and therefore rewards repeat viewings. The *mise en scène* of the music video is likewise often disorienting, filled to the brim with vibrant, kinetic images, creating a kind of sensory overload for the viewer. Again, it is only through repeated viewings that the viewer can fully consume the fullness of the images presented.

Likewise, music videos “must encompass a delivery of pleasure that relates visuals to the music that is being *sold*, that provides an experience of use-value offering a promise of further use-values in the commodity itself” (Goodwin 70-71). In other words, videos are pleasurable to watch at the moment of consumption (filled as they are with lush, fast moving and often erotic imagery) but they must also convince the viewer that the single, album and/or performer are a worth the consumer’s future monetary investment. This is why many rap videos devote much of their imagery to promoting a particular artists’ viability within the hip hop community. For example, many rap videos contain guest cameos by other, well known rappers or R & B crooners. By including these guest cameos, a rapper can demonstrate that s/he is significant enough in the music world to warrant collaboration with another music luminary. These videos frequently spotlight their collaborators by featuring them in their own, signature *mise en scène* every time their portion of the single is heard, or changing the entire look and feel and the video when their solo is playing.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> For example, during Mary J. Blige’s hooks in the Ludacris single “Runaway Love,” she appears dressed all in black, walking through an urban *mise en scène*. This setting and costuming differs from the portions of the song in which Ludacris’ rapping is featured.

Finally, the music video's mode of address is fundamentally different from that which is found in film or in television. In film and television, direct address is often viewed as a device which illuminates the constructedness of the text and makes narration visible. When an actor turns to the camera and acknowledges the "fourth wall," the viewer's illusion of being wrapped in a seamless narrative world (in which they witness events unseen) is shattered. As a result, direct address is often read as a modernist or *avante garde* technique for distancing the viewer from the text. In the music video, however, the musician almost always plays his/her performance directly to the camera. Oddly enough, this use of direct address does not break the illusion of the video, but rather, serves to pull the viewer further into the world of the song.<sup>231</sup> As we watch a music video we get the sense that the performer is singing *to* us and this seemingly personal connection is vital to the success of the pop song. More often than not, for the pop song to be a success the listener/viewer must see the song as belonging to the lead performer (and not some fictional character) and as issuing from his/her consciousness. "The aural address of the pop singer is thus unique in constituting a direct address to the listener/viewer in which the personality of the storyteller usually overwhelms characterization within the story" (Goodwin 76).

By contrast, in film, television and literature, there is almost always a distinction made between the author of the text and the fictional narrator (if there is one). For example, when watching *American Beauty* (1999, Sam Mendes), viewers do not assume that the voice-over that organizes our knowledge of the film's events is the voice of either the director (Sam Mendes) or the scriptwriter (Alan Ball); we assume that this voice belongs only to Lester

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<sup>231</sup> In television shows direct address is rarely used, but when it is, it usually appears in comedies, functioning to create a certain level of intimacy between a main character and the viewer. For example, the title characters of Fox comedies like *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000-2006) and *The Bernie Mac Show* (2001-2006) use direct address to establish intimacy between the viewer and the character

Burnham (Kevin Spacey), the film's fictional protagonist. However, in the pop song there is no clear division between the performer and the narrator/authorial voice of the song: "When a pop singer tells a first-person narrative in a song, he or she is simultaneously both the character in the song and the storyteller. Often the two positions become confused for audiences" (Goodwin 75). Of course many pop songs tell their stories in the third person, and these narrators are not intended to be viewed as coterminous with the performer (for example, Eminem's "Stan" [2000] is told from the point of view of an obsessed fan), but the majority of pop songs do not make this distinction so discrete. In the context of the music video, this collapsing of identities becomes even more apparent since the stories found in the single are, as I mentioned, told via the technique of direct address by a "present storyteller" (Goodwin 75). When Notorious B.I.G. raps about his life of poverty prior to making it big in the music industry in the video for "Juicy," he often faces the camera and directly addresses the audience, giving the impression that this narrative is his own, that *he* was the poverty-stricken child who "used to fuss when the landlord dissed us/ No heat, wonder why Christmas missed us" and who can now, as a result of his rap career, enjoy "Lunches, brunches, interviews by the pool." Furthermore, the viewer's knowledge of Notorious B.I.G.'s well publicized biography, which mirrors the lyrics and images seen in this video, works in tandem with his strategic use of direct address, thus adding to the artist's aura of authenticity. In other words, the use of direct address creates a (false) bond between the performer and the viewer, as if Notorious B.I.G. is telling us his rags to riches story directly.

I want to emphasize this last point because it is especially important for the hip hop video and the construction of the rapper's "authentic" persona. Hip hop, particularly gangsta rap or "hard core" rap, is and has always been tied to the belief that these artists are intimate with the gritty subject matter about which they write. The majority of successful gangsta or hard core

rappers come from lower middle class or working class backgrounds and many had previous careers as drug dealers (The Game, Notorious B.I.G.), gang members (50 Cent, Snoop Doggy Dogg, Eazy-E) and/or pimps (Ice-T), careers which are often discussed and celebrated in the gangsta rap narrative. Of course, it is important to point out that while rap music originated in the poverty stricken neighborhoods of the South Bronx and Queens, its original purpose was not social so much as it was recreational. The first MCs, like Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five and DJ Kool Herc, gained their notoriety through local block parties and battle rap contests in the 1970s, where the goal was to entertain the crowd and get them on their feet and dancing. Therefore, while the earliest examples of rap from the 1970s should be considered, by virtue of their originary status, as examples of the most authentic rap music, the actual concept of “authenticity” did not come to be associated with rap until the early 1990s, when “the emergence of gangsta rap shifted the focus in hip hop to the lived experiences of the post-industrial city on the West Coast, particularly Los Angeles” (Baldwin 165). Gangsta rap, filled with documentary-like details about poverty, police harassment, drug dealing and gang life, eventually became synonymous in the public imagination with the real life experiences of West Coast inner city residents. Chuck D, of Public Enemy (a group which predated and is not traditionally characterized as gangsta rap), once famously called rap music “the black CNN.” Thus, to be a successful rapper in the early 1990s meant that the artist had to have some personal experience with “life in the ‘hood.” Tommy Lott adds that gangsta rap “can only come from one’s experiences on the streets...the core meaning of the rapper’s use of the term ‘knowledge’ is to be *politically* astute, that is, to have a full understanding of the conditions under which black urban youth must survive” (“Marooned” 81-82).

While much rap music, particularly gangsta rap of the early 1990s, certainly contains a political message, this emphasis on rap music as the “voice of the ghetto,” as representative of authentic black culture, ignores the genre’s dependence on signifying, playfulness and boasts. As Robin Kelley explains “To begin with rap music as a mirror image of daily life ignores the influences of urban toasts and published ‘pimp narratives,’ which became popular during the late 1960s and early 1970s” and that “violent lyrics in rap music are rarely meant to be literal. Rather, they are more often than not metaphors to challenge competitors on the microphone” (130). Indeed, the first rap single to gain significant airplay, The Sugar Hill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight” (1979), was the product, not of the “streets,” but of savvy music producers, Sylvia and Joey Robinson of Sugar Hill Records,<sup>232</sup> who decided to try to capitalize on the then local phenomenon of rap music. As S. Craig Watkins points out, “the youth culture did not develop explicitly political expressions until after the road to commercial success had been paved” (“Black Youth” 571). Despite the fact that rap music is often associated either with political statements or at least with a journalistic approach to life in the streets, it is important to remember that since its inception rap music has always been a way for its practitioners to make money (and for its listeners to have a good time and dance). As a result, authenticity in the rap video should be understood as a carefully cultivated image, culled from a variety of sources, both real and imagined, to make money. While a rapper like 50 Cent may “really” have been a gangster before starting his rap career, this history is also heavily mediated and packaged in an effort to sell the 50 Cent “gangsta” persona.

Furthermore, Andrew Goodwin argues that we should not interpret video clips as if they were fictional narratives because “fiction, narrative and identity in music television are

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<sup>232</sup> For a comprehensive history of “Rapper’s Delight” see S. Craig Watkins’ *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (2005).

generally located at the level of the star-text, not within the discursive world of the fiction acted out by the pop star” (101). The “reality” at the heart of most music videos is the star’s persona and this persona is a composite of many factors, only some of which are rooted in reality. Since pop songs, as a result of their brevity and tendency towards repetition, lack the narrative depth and characterization found in other popular texts, the performer as character provides the listener/viewer with a coherent and multi-faceted point of identification that is (ideally) established before we ever see the performer in a music video:

Stars in music television are both more and less than characters in cinema or television fiction. Characterization is absent, on one level, in the brief, flimsy, and sometimes nonexistent narratives of a three-minute promotional clip. But characterization is also overwhelmingly present, if we accept the “documentary” status of music television, in that star images are to a large degree its central visual signs. (Goodwin 109)

In rap music this metatextual identity is most often used, as I mentioned, in service of verifying the performer’s authenticity and this identity (if successfully established) becomes the lens through which the listener/viewer understands the song/video. While viewers occasionally read fictional film or television characters through their metatextual identities (this tendency accounts for why certain actors become typecast),<sup>233</sup> this practice virtually dominates the way viewers approach a music video. And of course, as Goodwin points out, this practice serves an important commercial function since “Stardom and persona are the mechanisms through which record

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<sup>233</sup> A few contemporary television shows actually depend upon this confusion between actor and character. See Bernie Mac in *The Bernie Mac Show*, Lisa Kudrow in *The Comeback* (2005) and Tori Spelling in *So NoTORious* (2006). Likewise, films occasionally play with or upon the audience’s knowledge of an actor’s off screen persona. See John Malkovich in *Being John Malkovich* (1999, Spike Jonze), Howard Stern in *Private Parts* (1997, Betty Thomas) and Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Last Action Hero* (1993, John McTiernan).

companies seek out career longevity for their investments” (105). It is in the record company’s best interests to cultivate a star’s persona (even if that persona changes over time) because it is the star (as opposed to the album or the video) that will keep the consumers coming back for more. And as I have been arguing, this persona contains elements from the star’s “real” life, but is also heavily tempered by the commercial demands of the music industry. In this way the star of the music video is like De Bord’s spectacle, a signifier detached from its signified and made spectacular through the process of mass production and distribution. This spectacular, magnified image has far more meaning or value than the “real” person to whom it is so tenuously attached: “Media stars are spectacular representations of living human beings, distilling the essence of the spectacle’s banality into images of possible roles. Stardom is a diversification in the semblance of life” (De Bord 38).

### **5.1.1 Reclaiming Rap Music’s Lost Authenticity**

While I could choose just about any contemporary hip hop video for the following textual analysis, The Game’s (née Jayceon Taylor) “Hate It or Love It” (2005) is an exemplary text to study in that the song and its accompanying video are self consciously nostalgic for the origins of gangsta rap as well as the early 1990s gangsta ethos; this nostalgia is deployed in order to create an aura of authenticity. The artist’s authenticity is also established metatextually via the mythology surrounding The Game’s biography, including the fact that his parents were both allegedly members of the Crips gang and his brother was shot and killed when The Game was just 13-years-old. As a teenager The Game eventually joined the Bloods and embarked on a career as a drug dealer. Of course the most publicized aspect of The Game’s biography,

mentioned in almost every article and review<sup>234</sup> promoting his debut album, *The Documentary* (2005), is the fact that he turned to rapping only after he was shot five times (in the heart, stomach, arms and leg) in a drug deal gone wrong. He remained in a coma for three days and when he awoke, The Game decided that a career in rap might be safer than a career as a drug dealer. It is therefore significant that the title of his debut album, *The Documentary*, highlights the presumed reality of its own lyrics and implies that its tracks will be an unmediated view of life on the streets. Likewise, this emphasis on The Game's violent past is characteristic of the way rappers are typically promoted and how their authenticity is conveyed to the listener. As Jonathan Gold bluntly states: "Any conversation about rap music in Los Angeles is as likely to touch on easy violence as it is on the beats or the rhymes...Violence is what you're really interested in, [the Los Angeles rapper] knows that. And a gangster past somehow authenticates a rapper here, the way that blindness does a singer of the Delta Blues."

Most contemporary reviews of *The Documentary* also mention The Game's somewhat unconventional initiation to the world of rap music. That is, while The Game has the requisite biography for any good, authentic gangsta rapper (including the fact that he was born in Compton, California, the so-called birthplace of gangsta rap),<sup>235</sup> he turned to composing and performing rap music comparatively late in his life, at the age of 22, and found inspiration, not so much in his own compelling life experiences as he did in the work of the gangsta rappers who came before him. While recovering from his coma, The Game began to study what he calls "classic" hip hop albums, including N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton* (1989), Dr. Dre's *The*

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<sup>234</sup> See "The Game" in *XXL*, "Rules of the Game" in *The Guardian Unlimited*, "The Next Big Thing! The Game: Until stardom beckoned, Jayceon Taylor's life was appalling" in *Blender*, and "The Game: The Documentary" in *People Weekly*, etc.

<sup>235</sup> Gold cynically writes that "If you were going to invent your own Los Angeles rapper, he'd probably turn out a lot like The Game, too. You'd give him a broken home, the death of a beloved brother, a place in a Compton street gang, a drug career capped off with five bullets in his body."

*Chronic* (1992), Snoop Doggy Dogg's *Doggystyle* (1993), Tupac Shakur's *All Eyez on Me* (1996), Jay-Z's *Reasonable Doubt* (1996) and Notorious B.I.G.'s *Ready to Die* (1994), among others, in order to prepare himself for a career in the rap industry. It is significant that The Game did not look to the albums of earlier, so-called "old school" hip hop artists, like Slick Rick, Run DMC or even, Public Enemy; clearly, his inspiration stems specifically from the gangsta rap hey day of the early 1990s, the music which would have defined his adolescent years (he was born in 1979). The Game explains this process on his website "I mixed everybody's style into one. That's why some people feel that I sound like I'm from the East Coast even though I rap about the West Coast" (*The Game*). This statement acknowledges the fact that he studied both West Coast identified rappers (Dr. Dre, Tupac Shakur, Snoop Doggy Dogg) and East Coast identified rappers (Notorious B.I.G., Jay-Z). Indeed, one *Entertainment Weekly* reviewer dubbed his style as "neo-West Coast" (Fiore) since The Game is attempting to resuscitate the almost-dead West Coast style of the 1990s.

The Game's approach to rap music—study and imitation—contradicts the more organic narrative of origins related by other rappers. Artists like Notorious B.I.G., Ice Cube and Jay-Z, for example, all claim that they began rapping at a young age, and often cite rap music as their salvation from a life of hustling on the streets. Rapping was not a conscious choice these men made; rather rapping was always a part of their lives. These narratives are promoted diegetically, through song lyrics,<sup>236</sup> and extra-diegetically, through fansites, interviews and articles. Furthermore, most rappers must first prove themselves on their local stomping grounds,

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<sup>236</sup> For example, in the track "December 4<sup>th</sup>" from Jay-Z's *The Black Album* (2003), brief anecdotes of Jay-Z's childhood are recounted by his mother, Gloria Carter. These apparently unscripted recollections are mixed with the rapper's lyrics and song samples, and bolster Jay Z's "authentic" persona as a child of the ghetto who was saved by rap music. In one segment Carter offers a myth of origins for her son: "Shawn [Jay-Z's given name] use to be in the kitchen beating on the table and rapping until the wee hours of the morning. And then I bought him a boom box. And his sisters and brothers said he would drive them nuts. But that was my way to keep him close to me and out of trouble."

gaining approval from their crew (i.e., a collection of rappers from the same neighborhood who share labels and producers, and who often appear on each other's recordings and tour together) and their neighborhood in general, before obtaining a high-profile record deal:

In interviews and on recordings most rappers refer to their early days, citing the time spent with their 'home boys,' writing raps, perfecting their turntable skills, and taking the stage at parties and local clubs or dances (Cross 1993). Their perspective emerges from within the highly localized conditions that they know and the places they inhabit. (Forman 207)

Within the rap community it is believed that a rapper cannot develop a distinctive style or the necessary "local flavor" unless he or she first "pays dues" by subjecting his or her work to the often highly critical audiences found in the local clubs or at battle rap competitions. Forman adds that this rigorous practice serves a purpose: "By coming up through the crew, young promising artists learn the ropes, acquire lessons in craft and showmanship, attain stage or studio experience and exposure and, quite frequently, win record deals based on their apprenticeships and posse connections" (208). In fact, since the early 1990s, rap music has shifted from a concern with "broad, generalized spaces" to "the representation of specific named cities and 'hoods'" (202). This shift is reflected in the proliferation of regionally-identified rap acts: Ludacris frequently gives "shout outs" Georgia (specifically Atlanta) in his songs, Paul Wall and Mike Jones reference their hometown of Houston, Texas, Nelly is identified with St. Louis, Missouri and Eminem often mentions his life growing up in Detroit, Michigan (specifically the area known as "8 Mile"): "In practice, artists' lyrics and rhythms must achieve success on the home front first, where the flow, subject matter, style and image must resonate meaningfully among those who share common bonds to place, to the posse and to the 'hood'" (Forman 208).

When a rapper finally does acquire a record deal and releases his/her first single, the audience can verify his/her authenticity by finding out what other rappers and fans from his/her hometown think of his/her music.<sup>237</sup>

The Game's myth of origins appears somewhat artificial by comparison; rapping was not a part of his life growing up, rather he "trained" himself to become a rapper, much as one goes to trade school to learn how to be an auto mechanic or medical school to become a doctor. In an interview with *Blender* magazine The Game acknowledged this unconventional model "Like a lawyer studying for the bar, that's how I studied those albums." Likewise, The Game did not "pay his dues" among his peers—by performing in local competitions or selling mix tapes out of the trunk of his car—in order to snag his first record deal. Within one year<sup>238</sup> of beginning his "studies" in rap, The Game's thirty track demo CD found its way into the hands of one of the most prominent and well-respected producers in the industry, Dr. Dre. Soon thereafter he signed a recording deal with Dr. Dre's Aftermath label. Furthermore, his first major studio album,<sup>239</sup> *The Documentary*, featured tracks produced by and/or featuring such rap and R&B luminaries as Kanye West, Timbaland, 50 Cent, Eminem, Nate Dogg, Mary J. Blige and Busta Rhymes. As a result, many reviews of the album mention that it would be difficult to *not* enjoy these tracks, given the caliber of the various talents that are attached to it. One annoyed music critic explained "*The Documentary* positions The Game as nothing more than a hip-hop *American Idol* winner. He passed the audition, and now his shapeless qualities can easily be molded by the likes of Dre, Eminem, Kanye West and Timbaland" (Grierson). Jonathan Gold's

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<sup>237</sup> As a white rapper Eminem's authenticity and rapping abilities were often questioned by rap fans as well as the media. However, because Eminem proved himself on the local level, by participating in battle rap competitions and other local performances, he ultimately achieved acceptance in the mainstream rap community.

<sup>238</sup> The Game was shot in October 2001 (the event which prompted his decision to become a rapper) and signed with Aftermath Records sometime in 2002.

<sup>239</sup> The Game did release one album prior to *The Documentary*, entitled *Untold Story* (2004) with a small record label, Get Low Recordz.

criticism is even more biting “A few months after the release of *The Chronic* [Dr. Dre’s first solo album], Dr. Dre told me that he could produce a hit record with a cheese sandwich on the mic, and there are times on *The Documentary* where it seems that he has.” Likewise, in his review of the album in *Entertainment Weekly*, Raymond Fiore adds:

If you were a young rapper recording your major-label debut, who would you draft for your dream team of collaborators? Probably Kanye West, Just Blaze, and Dr. Dre for some fresh-outta-the-oven beats. 50 Cent and Eminem for a few killer cameos. And, of course, Mary J. Blige and Faith Evans for some hood-friendly hooks to satisfy the female R&B base. Bam! You’re practically certified platinum before that baby’s been mixed and mastered.

Most rap artists need to spend years on the club circuit in order to build a local reputation and eventually snag a record deal. And once that record comes out, the rapper needs a few hit singles in order to attract the talents of the aforementioned artists (especially all of them on one album). And yet the Game, with only his gangsta biography and a love of classic gangsta rap to back him up, achieved all of this after only a few years on the rap scene. It makes sense that some critics and fans would be skeptical of his talents.

I would argue that the critics’ objections to The Game’s seemingly prefabricated career and his instant conversion from street thug to platinum-selling studio MC is rooted in Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of taste in *Distinction* (1984). Bourdieu argues that in the realm of art, there is a rift between the aesthete or *mondain* whose development of taste is cultivated through a lifetime of exposure and “natural” predilections, and the scholar or pedant, whose appreciation of art is learned, not in the home, but through an institution (69). While the aesthete’s sense of taste is the result of a life long process of immersion in the arts and letters, the scholar’s taste, which

has been developed as a result of study, is viewed (by the aesthete) as a short cut or a way to make up for lost time. This debate boils down to the difference between experience and study, between authenticity and imitation; the aesthete has this knowledge based on who he *is* while the scholar has obtained knowledge based on what he *does*: “Knowledge by experience...feels and deplores the essential inadequacy of words and concepts to express the reality ‘tasted’ in mystical union, rejects as unworthy the intellectual love of art, the knowledge which identifies experience of the work with an intellectual operation of deciphering” (Bourdieu 68). Like Bourdieu’s *mondain*, the authentic gangsta rapper has been *born* into his role. He is able to rap about the streets because he was born and raised in the streets and has been rapping about these experiences for his entire life. This knowledge is natural to him, making his rap persona authentic.

Of course, as Bourdieu points out, the distinction between aesthete and the scholar is a class-based one, thus proving how taste functions to legitimize social differences. But in the world of rap music, this opposition is reversed; only those from the *underclass*, who have suffered and struggled for their art, can make great, authentic gangsta rap. The middle- and upper classes, the suburbanites and the squares, will always be slightly on the outside looking in on this world. For example, Kanye West, who began his career as a successful rap and R & B producer (for artists including Jay-Z, Common, Alicia Keys, Janet Jackson, Eminem, and John Legend) initially had a difficult time convincing the rap community that he could make it as a solo artist. West, the upper middle class child of a college professor and a former Black Panther, was initially viewed as too “bougie” (e.g., “bourgeois”) to be a credible rapper. *Time* magazine interviewed rapper Jay-Z who explained his reluctance towards West’s prospects as a rapper in this way “We all grew up street guys who had to do whatever we had to do to get by. Then

there's Kanye, who to my knowledge has never hustled a day in his life. I didn't see how it could work" (qtd. in Tryangiel). Thus, despite his proven abilities as a producer, West's contemporaries doubted his rapping ability based on his class background alone. In order to preempt these criticisms, West developed a rap persona that emphasizes rather than hides his class background. He wears country club attire (including pastel-colored Polo shirts, sweater vests, madras pants and loafers) in publicity photos and music videos and his two album titles—*The College Dropout* (2004) and *Late Registration* (2005)—reference his experiences (and failures) in the world of higher education (generally a more middle- and upper class pursuit). By contrast, The Game had the proper class background to be a gangsta rapper, however he did not grow up rapping. Instead, he had to study rap, much as the scholar must study art and literature in order to have the knowledge that the aesthete has had since birth. Given rap music's emphasis on authenticity and experience, it is understandable that some people in the rap community were uncomfortable with The Game's sudden initiation in to the world of rap. His successful accumulation of cultural capital, of the "rules" of rapping, implies that anyone, not just those who spent their whole lives composing anguished lyrics and drumming out beats on the kitchen table in order to escape the hustler's life, can become credible gangsta rappers. Part of gangsta rap's allure is that those who practice it are street narrators, people who grew up in a world of crime and desperation, but who have been able to convert their pain and rage into art.

At the root of these critiques of The Game and his so-called inauthenticity is also an underlying fear about the state of rap music in general. There is a fear that the defining line between contemporary rap and pop music has disintegrated, that rap is now pop. These critics seem nervous that rap music, as one of the most publicized examples of contemporary black cultural achievement, will soon become synonymous with the studio-created pop sound: reliable,

catchy but indistinguishable, and yet strangely satisfying. Fans of pop music have long since reconciled themselves to the fact that most pop idols have been selected to be stars for reasons other than pure singing talent and that they have been groomed by far more talented song writers, vocal coaches, choreographers and stylists, to become the sparkling pop concoction we see in music videos or lip syncing at award's shows; this practice dates back to at least the 1950s, when singers like Fabian were made into stars based on their good looks and charm. However, rap music, particularly gangsta rap, which is founded on the belief that this music comes from the streets, from the people, the idea of a studio-created star is fairly horrifying. Tim Grierson illustrates this fear in his review of *The Documentary*: "Perhaps that's the sobering discovery about *The Documentary*: The beatmasters are forever king; they just need to plug in whatever new guppy comes down the pike and it's all good. And you don't have to worry about the audience, either. We don't care if the record sounds familiar; this is the shit, we're told, and we'd better recognize" (Grierson). There seems to be a growing fear that the authenticity which rap music has prided itself on, the belief that rap music is a voice of a particular generation, neighborhood, or race, is now superfluous to success because in the contemporary marketplace "authenticity" can be isolated and manufactured as easily as any catchy hook. And if "authenticity" can be generated so effortlessly, with the right producer and the right amount of money, then rap will cease to be a uniquely black art form. Instead, like rock n' roll, it will be dominated and associated primarily with white cultural production.

Furthermore, hip hop, as it approaches its thirtieth anniversary, has entered, to quote *PopMatters* columnist Dan Nishimoto, a period of "navel gazing," in which popular culture as well as the rappers themselves have become reflective and wistful about hip hop's past. This turn to nostalgia is reflected in VH1's "Hip Hop Honors" series (2004- ), an awards

show celebrating hip hop's origins and honoring luminaries in the field like Notorious B.I.G., Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, and Big Daddy Kane. And in 2006 the National Museum of American History launched a collecting initiative entitled, "Hip-Hop Won't Stop: The Beat, The Rhymes, The Life," which seeks to "trace hip-hop from its origins in the 1970s, as an expression of urban black and Latino youth culture, to its status today." This nostalgia for hip hop's past extends into the music itself, with established artists like Nas, Jay-Z and Snoop Doggy Dogg devoting their most recent albums to contemplating their own careers as well as hip hop's past.

For example, in 2006 Nas generated headlines and debates<sup>240</sup> when he released *Hip Hop is Dead*, an album lambasting the contemporary hip hop scene for its loss of focus and its emphasis on catchy pop hooks. This anger seems to be partially rooted in the current dominance of pop chart friendly rap music, particularly Southern-based rap, which according to *New York Times* music reviewer Kelefa Sanneh, is style more concerned about "culture than craft": "Instead of worrying about similes and detailed narrative, Southern hip-hop often emphasizes beats, nonverbal expressions (grunts and groans for instance), party chants, sing-song cadences." One popular Southern style known as "crunk," for example, eschews story telling in favor of simple, repetitive refrains, much like any standard pop song. This style of music exists less to examine the difficulties of life on the street than it does to get bodies out onto the dance floor. In many ways, in fact, the contemporary rap scene mirrors rap's early days, when it was primarily used to liven up parties and to get people dancing. Furthermore, this particular style of rap music, which is primarily a collection of catchy hooks, beats and an occasional lyric, is extremely amenable to studio production. Thus Nas' critique also appears to

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<sup>240</sup> See "In major awards, rap gets no love" in the *Los Angeles Times* and "Who killed hip-hop? Nas launches investigation" in *USA Today*.

be based on the fear that rap music is losing its creativity—that all of the “magic” happens with a studio rather than with a pen. As a result, rap music is losing its ability to critique the status quo and to narrativize life in urban America. On the single “Hip Hop is Dead” (2006), Nas raps “Heinous crimes help record sales more than creative lines/And I don’t wanna keep bringing up the greater times/But I’m a dreamer, nostalgic with the state of mind.” Here he criticizes rappers like The Game and 50 Cent who are more famous for their criminal records than for their rapping skills.

While it makes sense that rap veterans like Nas might turn a longing eye to the past as the hip hop sound and culture shifts towards a younger generation of performers, it seems strange that The Game, as a representative of the very generation being criticized, would also take such a nostalgic approach in his music. However, I believe that The Game is invoking rap’s past as a “false” nostalgia, a form of pastiche, in which imagery is invoked, not as something to build upon or dialogue with, but rather to create an aura of authenticity around himself. For example, on his website he proclaims:

A lot of rap today is bubblegum bullshit that says nothing and means nothing to anybody living in the ‘hood...I’m not knocking anybody’s hustle but I can’t feel what’s in hip-hop today. Everybody’s rapping but they’re not saying anything. NWA, Biggie, 2Pac, Snoop and Jay-Z all had something to say then Biggie, Pac and Eazy died and it was devastating. We almost let rap die until the Great White Hype (Eminem) saved hip-hop and 50 dropped the gangsta wake-up call. I feel like it’s my turn now and I can fill the shoes. (*The Game*)

Lacking the proper apprenticeship in the industry needed to create credibility, The Game associates his own persona with that of gangsta rap’s illustrious past, in the hopes that these

associations can stand in for his missing experience and his missing authenticity. The “Hate it or Love it” video is thus a key text for the study of the ghetto action cycle because its project of authentication revolves around images and motifs culled from that very cycle. Merely by providing visual “nods” to the ghetto action cycle (and, by extension, the gangsta ethos of the early 1990s), the video and its featured artist can be aligned with a more authentic, “lost” period of black cultural production.

## **5.2 CASE STUDY: “HATE IT OR LOVE IT”**

Given this emphasis on the past and remembrance, it is fitting that the video for “Hate it or Love it” opens with The Game making an invocation to the camera, “Uh huh, let’s take ‘em back,” much as a fairytale opens with the words “Once upon a time...” These words signal to the listener/viewer that they are about hear and see, not just a story from the past, but a story that holds a mythical, if not magical, weight. Furthermore, by opening his video with these words, the rapper (consciously or not) sets up the parallel between these two types of storytelling—the fairytale and rap music—which rely upon an economy of symbolic imagery and word play in order to make meanings. These words are preceded by a medium shot of The Game standing atop a building. He is shirtless, wearing only a bandana, several gold chains, baggy jeans and a large, expensive-looking watch (all signifiers of the gangsta image). As the camera revolves around him we can see low buildings, single-family homes, abundant trees and the presence of a young, black child riding his bike behind him. This imagery indicates that The Game is most likely standing in a South Central Los Angeles suburb. Likewise, the entire frame is suffused with the bright, yellow sunlight that characterized the cinematography of West Coast-based

ghetto action films like *Boyz N the Hood*, *South Central* and *Menace II Society*. The exaggerated, almost idyllic, qualities of this lighting, however, combined with The Game's supplicatory stance (he looks skyward and claps his hands together as the camera rotates around him), indicate that the images we are about to see and the words we are about to hear stem from his personal memories; that he is channeling this lost world for the listener/viewer. Indeed, the words "Uh huh, let's take 'em back," spoken directly to the camera, focus the viewer's attention on the teller of the tale; he will be our guide through this story.

The first narrative that appears in the video does not belong to The Game, however, but to 50 Cent (née Curtis Jackson), who raps for approximately one third of the song. As I mentioned earlier, one method for establishing the viability and strength of the hip hop community is the practice of having one performer feature another artist on his/her track. In the case of "Hate it or Love it," 50 Cent's presence in the song and in the video acts as a validation of the Game; he is part of 50 Cent's crew (both artists worked with the same producer, Dr. Dre) and therefore 50 Cent's cameo signals to the audience that The Game is a legitimate artist worth listening to. During this opening segment the two rappers appear, significantly, in two different spaces, each associated with their media-publicized origins: while The Game materializes in the aforementioned bright, sunny neighborhoods of Los Angeles, donning the clothing of the L.A. gangsta, 50 Cent is located in the night time settings of Queens, New York, wearing clothing more identified with the East Coast "b-boy" style (oversized puffer vest, hooded sweatshirt, Yankees baseball cap). These two locales serve as condensed biographies for each star. For example, as 50 Cent raps we see several key images dramatizing his childhood experiences in Queens: a young boy sitting alone in a drab living room ("Daddy ain't around probably out commitin' felonies"), that same boy primping in front of a bedroom mirror, surrounded by

posters of 1980s era rappers like Eric B and Rakim, Kurtis Blow and Biz Markie (“My favorite rapper used to sing ‘Check, check out my melodies”), and the boy proudly displaying a platinum knuckle-ring spelling out the word “Queens” (“I wanna live good, so shit I sell dope/ For a four-finger ring, one of those gold ropes”). This East Coast segment concludes with the adult 50 Cent leaving the borough of Queens at night in a limousine (“Different day, same shit, ain’t nothing good in the ‘hood/I’d run away from this bitch and never come back if I could”).

In addition to providing the listener/viewer with 50 Cent’s *bildungsroman*, which would be familiar to his fans as a result of his music and his well-publicized biography,<sup>241</sup> this segment also establishes, in a condensed form, one of the basic narratives found in the ghetto action film: a young boy is neglected by his criminalized family and seduced by the lure of material goods into selling drugs; the boy soon realizes that the criminal life is a difficult one and finally escapes from the ‘hood. In many ghetto action films, such as *Boyz N the Hood*, *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991, Matty Rich), *Menace II Society* and *Fresh* (1994, Boaz Yakin), the ‘hood is depicted as a space that must be abandoned in order for the protagonist to achieve his/her dreams. Paula Massood has argued that “Mobility and entrapment have been central themes in black films from their very inception and increasingly became a central thematic concern (in both film and literature) as the nation’s black population’s association with the city increased, and the city became equated with a dystopian economic and social prison” (*Black City Cinema* 201). This metaphor of city as prison is emphasized when a reflection of one of Queen’s many housing projects passes over 50 Cent’s face as he exits the borough in his limousine. Of course, as we know from 50 Cent’s personal biography, he is not leaving the dystopic city for the safety

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<sup>241</sup> Before becoming a rapper, 50 Cent was a crack dealer. He has also been shot nine times, a fact which is frequently highlighted in press interviews and album reviews. See for example “Banking On 50 Cent” in *People Weekly*.

of a more idyllic rural or suburban space (as we see in the conclusions of *Boyz N the Hood*, *Fresh*, *Clockers*, etc.). Rather, he is leaving a more metaphoric space—the poverty and gang warfare of his youth in Queens—for the lucrative world of rap music in either New York City or Los Angeles. The hardships which must be escaped are located not so much in the “city” as they are in the “hood” and in the obscurity of a life outside of the music industry.

The opening sequence of “Hate it or Love it” is also significant because of its emphasis on specific signifiers of place within the Jamaica neighborhood of Queens, New York. As I have pointed out in previous chapters, one significant semantic element of the ghetto action cycle is the foregrounding of place, particularly street signs and local landmarks. “Hate it or Love it” also relies upon this practice in order to establish the reality of the spaces being shown. In this segment we see a low angle shot of street signs marking the corner of 161<sup>st</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> Street, a sign reading “South Jamaica Houses,” and the final, bird’s eye shot of a limousine driving across (what appears to be) the Queensboro Bridge towards Manhattan. The cross street signals a specific neighborhood in Jamaica (perhaps 50 Cent’s childhood home) while the South Jamaica Housing Projects more broadly signifies the extreme poverty and criminal elements found in the Jamaica neighborhood. The South Jamaica Houses, nicknamed the “40 Projects” because of their proximity to Public School 40, is one of the largest and oldest housing projects in the United States and consequently developed a reputation for being home to several South Jamaica gangs (Brown 1-3). We are not being shown the generalized ghetto or ‘hood, but rather, *50 Cent’s* ‘hood, which is tied to his distinct “flavor” of rap music. If the opening of “Hate it or Love it” is narrativizing 50 Cent’s rise from street hustler to multi-platinum artist, then these brief images of Jamaica locales are intended as signifiers of the artist’s persona. That is, 50 Cent’s music *is* Jamaica and had he not grown up in this specific environment, the rhymes we are

currently listening to would sound quite different. This emphasis on location highlights the regionalism of rap music and the ongoing significance of geographic boundaries within the ghetto action cycle. Finally, by firmly locating the beginning of the video in Queens, the song is nodding to rap's origins in that neighborhood, as well as the Bronx and New York City as a whole. Acts like Run-DMC, LL Cool J, Eric B (of Eric B and Rakim) and Salt N' Pepa—all indicative of "old school" rap music from the 1980s—hail from the borough of Queens. Therefore it is fitting that 50 Cent lyrically samples Eric B and Rakim's foundational album *Paid in Full* (1987) when he raps "My favorite rapper used to sing 'Check, check out my melodies'."<sup>242</sup>

The video then transitions from the East Coast to the West Coast via the presence of The Game in the same limousine that is escorting 50 Cent away from South Jamaica during the song's chorus. 50 Cent raps during the first half of this chorus ("Hate it or love it the underdog's on top/ And I'm gonna shine, homie, until my heart stop") and then the song is placed in the hands of The Game, who is now revealed to be sitting in front of 50 Cent in the limousine. Appropriately, The Game's portion of the chorus is "Go ahead, envy me/ I'm rap's M.V.P./ And I ain't goin' nowhere so you can get to know me." By opening the video with 50 Cent, in both image and word, The Game is paying tribute to his roots<sup>243</sup> while simultaneously legitimizing his own ascent in the rap game; he appears in 50 Cent's 'hood and dresses in

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<sup>242</sup> On the single "My Melody," Rakim raps "Turn up the bass, check out my melody, hand out a cigar/ I'm lettin' knowledge be born, and my name's the R."

<sup>243</sup> In order to introduce The Game to audiences, producer Aftermath Records decided to associate him with the more established 50 Cent and his crew, G Unit. Although The Game was not originally a part of the New York-based G Unit (coming from a completely different part of the country), Dr. Dre believed this association (placing The Game in 50 Cent and G Unit videos), would create a buzz around both. Jonathan Gold views this collaboration as more forced than genial "50 Cent, Dr. Dre's last protégé, may never have been particularly enamored of The Game. One hears that Dre (and Jimmy Iovine) dropped The Game off with 50 Cent's G-Unit crew like a father sending his son off to spend the summer with a half-brother in Brooklyn, and the new jack may have taken his status in the crew a little bit too much for granted."

clothing similar to 50 Cent's b-boy style, indicating his deference to a more established MC as well as to the East Coast origins of rap music. But, as the chorus ends we see a long shot of the New York City skyline at night which dissolves, via a graphic match, to a long shot of a sunny, Los Angeles neighborhood. This transition signals that we are moving out of 50 Cent's space and into The Game's 'hood of Compton. This move to Compton also alludes to The Game's true musical influence—West Coast hip hop.

The very next shot, which coincides with the first words of The Game's first full verse, is a familiar one from the ghetto action cycle: a wide angle shot of The Game driving a convertible, with a friend in the passenger's seat. As with the video's first segment, The Game is introduced to the viewer in a primary space (his "low rider"), narrating, followed by brief images illustrating his past. First we see a group of young African American men wearing white tanks tops, plaid button down shirts and red bandanas, gambling or possibly fighting on a street corner as the Game raps "Kill a nigga on my song but really do it/ That's the true meaning of a ghostwriter." Here the rapper visually associates himself with a Los Angeles gang (the Bloods) and verbally asserts his gangsta authenticity (i.e., he does not just *rap* about killing people, he has really done it).<sup>244</sup> The next images we see are of a little boy in front of his mirror, whose outfit changes in a series of dissolves from denim overalls to a black jacket, baseball cap and sunglasses, and lastly, to a red plaid shirt and a red bandana. These outfit changes signify that the boy is slowly "maturing" into the hardcore gang lifestyle; he progresses from wearing the clothing of a typical 1990s teenager (overalls) to gang colors ("I'm from Compton, wear the wrong colors, be cautious"). This series of images are also intended to mirror those which

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<sup>244</sup> The vigilant viewer would also be aware of this fact from the moment The Game appears onscreen. The Game dons a tear drop tattoo next to his left eye, a mark commonly used to signify that the wearer has committed a murder.

appeared in the 50 Cent segment, thus establishing further parallels between both artists' coming of age narratives.

The next series of images in the video indicate that The Game was, at one point in his life, fully immersed in the violent world of the Bloods. We see an older black male, dressed in a white tank top, khakis and a red bandana talking on a pay phone; in the foreground is a sign advertising the "Neighborhood Watch" program ("One phone call will have your body dumped in Marcy").<sup>245</sup> Here the signage takes on an ironic tone—the only effective neighborhood watch in Compton are the gangs, who are the eyes of the street and who can have any potential threat eliminated with one phone call. This image is then followed by a vignette, which is more detailed than any of the others which have appeared in the video thus far, and represents an explanation for why The Game turned to gang life. As he raps, "Been bangin' since my lil' nigga Rob got killed for his Barkleys,"<sup>246</sup> we see two young boys in athletic jerseys, standing on an outdoor basketball court. The boys look carefree and smile at each other. Their expressions suddenly change to fear, however, and the next shot reveals what has frightened them—an older boy, wearing clothing more identified with that of a gang member (white undershirt, skull cap, etc). A brief shot of the older boy pulling out a weapon is followed by a cut to an aerial shot of one of the younger boys sprawled out on the court as his friend kneels by his body. As these images flash on screen The Game explains, "That's 10 years, I told Pooh in '95 'I'd kill you if you try me for my Air Max 95s'." Here The Game invokes a common narrative that was repeated throughout the early 1990s—that young black males living in the nation's ghettos were shooting and killing each other over luxury goods like leather jackets and designer athletic shoes

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<sup>245</sup> "Marcy" refers to the Marcy Projects in Brooklyn, NY. This line seems to indicate that The Game's connections were so extensive that he could have someone killed on the other side of the country, just with one phone call. Or, alternatively, that he is able to rid himself of any connection to the body by having it dumped in a remote location.

<sup>246</sup> "Barkleys" is a reference to Charles Barkley's line of Nike sneakers.

(Nike Air Barkleys, Nike Air Max '95s). This image is also a visual quote of a scene from the ghetto action film *Fresh*, in which a local preteen, who excels at basketball, is shot point blank by an older gang banger who is frustrated when the youth beats him during a pick up game. This event is revealed to the viewer via an aerial shot as well, as the protagonist contemplates the carnage in disbelief. In both "Hate it or Love it" and in *Fresh*, this traumatic event leads the protagonist decisively towards a more violent future.

As with 50 Cent's narrative, this segment concludes with an escape from the 'hood. While he raps, "I ain't have 50 cent when my Grandmomma died" we see two young boys, one dressed in gang colors, spray painting the letters "N.W.A." on a fence and being arrested by two white policemen. This line is has a doubled meaning—The Game was both poor *and* lacked connections to the rap world (i.e., 50 Cent) in his youth. At this time he is only an admirer of rap music who expresses his devotion to groups like N.W.A. through graffiti. The medium shot of the two young boys in the back of a police cruiser is followed by a graphic match to medium shot of 50 Cent and The Game seated in an airplane, a cut implying that 50 Cent and The Game are as close as boyhood chums.<sup>247</sup> Here again we can see how camaraderie is established within the narrative of the hip hop video. They smile and display their wrists to reveal large, expensive-looking watches. This image is accompanied by the line "Now I'm goin' back to Cali with my Jacob on,/ See how time fly?" which is a reference to the very expensive line of watches made and sold by the famed New York-based "Jacob the Jeweler."<sup>248</sup> The video then cuts to a small jet flying through the same golden-lit atmosphere that the video is identifying

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<sup>247</sup> Of course, not too long after this video was filmed, 50 Cent and The Game had a falling out. The two artists now publicly disparage each other whenever possible (Gold).

<sup>248</sup> Jacob Arabo, a Russian immigrant, first gained notoriety in the mid-1990s when R & B artist Faith Evans wore some of his custom-made pieces on the cover of her new CD. Once she introduced her then-husband, Notorious B.I.G., to the jeweler, Arabo became the jeweler of choice for hip hop celebrities. Some of his signature watches can cost several hundred thousand dollars (*Jacob & Co.*).

with The Game's childhood residence of Los Angeles. The visual pun of "time flying," represented both by The Game's ability to afford such expensive time pieces as well as his escape from the 'hood into the lucrative world of rap music, likewise mirrors 50 Cent's departure from Jamaica in a limousine. It is significant that in both of these shots the rappers exit their respective 'hoods in luxury vehicles, a move which works to condense time and make their celebrity something that had to be achieved and yet was always already present.

This section of the video is also laden with various signifiers of place. Interspersed with the aforementioned images from The Games' youth are specific landmarks and signs from his Compton neighborhood, including a sign for the Compton Civic Center, the Martin Luther King Jr. Transit Center and the street sign "Piru." In keeping with the video's tendency to hail the past, the latter sign is a specific reference to the legacy of the Bloods, who were founded on Piru Street in 1973. Several important landmarks, which are more broadly associated with the area of South Central Los Angeles, appear towards the end of the video: Nickerson Gardens, the Watts Towers, Jordan's Hot Dogs and the cross street of "Elm" and "Kemp." Nickerson Gardens is a public housing apartment complex, on the borders of Watts and Compton, and is widely recognized as being the territory of the Bloods (Krikorian). The use of this sign is thus another reference to The Game's links with gang culture, but also a signifier of the poverty and crime which has come to be associated with South Central Los Angeles. Likewise, the Watts Towers, a collection of seventeen interconnected steel structures erected over fifty years ago, have become visual signifiers of the Watts community. Finally, Jordan's Hot Dogs is an iconic hot dog stand in Compton, while the cross street of Elm and Kemp is, like the earlier image of 161<sup>st</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> Street, a more personal location. Again the viewer's degree of intimacy with the rapper would determine how many of these "shout outs" are understood, and

perhaps only The Game's closest friends understand the significance of this particular street corner. In all cases, the use of these images fosters an illusion of intimacy between star and the listener/viewer. The Game is taking his audience on a tour of his 'hood, and the more they have invested in The Game's personal history and the history of his neighborhood, the more rewarding and enlightening this tour becomes. Indeed, recognizing these references and appreciating their symbolic meanings provides the viewer with the feeling that s/he is a member of the hip hop subculture and that this is privileged knowledge, available only to true fans rather than to the masses in general.

In addition to this social commentary, "Hate it or Love it" is, of course, a four minute advertisement for The Game as an artist, his new album *The Documentary*, and the work of his various collaborators. For example, both the lyrics and images in the video reference the "G-Unit," a name which refers to 50 Cent's record label (G Unit Records), his crew of rappers (including 50 Cent, The Game and others) and 50 Cent's line of "urban" clothing.<sup>249</sup> Thus in addition to including members of the G-Unit in the video as well as shout outs to the label ("G Unit!") at various points during the song, The Game dons two different G-Unit sweatbands and 50 Cent wears a G Unit T-shirt. The appearance of this clothing line in the video is one of the more explicit ways in which the rapper's star persona becomes commodified in the music video.

In addition to the G Unit, the video also features members of The Game's crew, known as "The Black Wallstreet," named after the affluent all black community of Tulsa, Oklahoma that was bombed and burned to the ground in 1921. The video features several members of The Black Wallstreet, who are identified through tattoos, T-shirts or necklaces

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<sup>249</sup> The G Unit clothing line, designed by Marc Ecko, is intended to be seen as a distillation of the G Unit's star persona. According to the official website: "Reflecting both the rugged and refined aspects of the G Unit lifestyle, the clothing line draws direct inspiration and input from its' namesakes. The collection truly represents the 'style of the streets,' an interpretation inspired by G Unit's raw image and savvy personas." (*G Unit*).

bearing the group's name. According to The Black Wallstreet's official website, it is "an organization and corporation that is interested in the primary social development and economic advancement of the Hip Hop (Urban) community, by providing cultural enlightenment via the Art and Entertainment division: Fashion (Apparel) and Music Division (Record Label), by providing community development via Real Estate Investment (Property Ownership), and by providing Gang Intervention (Non Profit organization)..." Rather than a force which is dragging down African American youth by fetishizing material goods and violence, The Black Wallstreet promises to "give back" to the black community. Here again the music video is being used to sell something beyond the single, the album and the artist—the video is selling rap music as a benevolent godfather to the broader hip hop community.

The current project of many hip hop videos is also to sell the viability and authenticity of hip hop culture to an audience that is becoming increasingly disillusioned over the current state of rap music. Analyzing "Hate it or Love it" reveals how the images and themes of the ghetto action cycle have become significant vehicles for communicating ghetto authenticity and nostalgia for hip hop's past. The video contains traces, both in its narrative and imagery, of some of the ghetto action cycle's primary filmic sources. Most prominently, the video articulates both the semantics and syntax of the social problem film. If the first two thirds of the video narrativize each artists' coming of age in the 'hood, the last third is a more generalized meditation on life in the 'hood for black youth. 50 Cent introduces this section with the lines: "From the beginnin' to the end/ Losers lose, winners win/This is real we ain't got to pretend/ The cold world that we in/ Is full of pressure and pain/ Enough of me, nigga, now listen to Game." The image once again obeys the lyrics, as 50 Cent appears where he did at the beginning of the video and the beginning of his career, in his Queens setting. As he raps, the camera rotates

around him to reveal the towering backdrop of a housing project that appears to surround him on all sides. This image is replicated in the next shot, which shows a black youth standing in the middle of a basketball court (which, with its chain-link fence lined borders, also signifies a jail cell) being handcuffed by two white police officers. Here the camera's circular movement implicates both the police as well as the ever-present housing projects as forces which attempt to constrain urban black youth. Of course, the seeming inevitability of a life of crime or incarceration is tempered by the fact that in addition to the high walls of the projects, we see a series of sidewalks extending out from the location where 50 Cent is delivering his verses. We cannot see where these sidewalks lead, but they have no apparent end, signifying the possibility of choice and escape, even from this cold, seemingly predetermined world in which "losers lose" and "winners win." Here the video mimics the dual syntax of the social problem film. Environment (poverty, police brutality, rampant criminality, etc.) is responsible for the deviance of the juvenile delinquent, and yet the juvenile delinquent also has a choice about what he can do with his life (represented by the numerous sidewalks which extend away from the rapper). Much like the street urchins who appear in *Dead End*, "Hate it or Love it" both offers a critique of social conditions while simultaneously removing the weight of that blame from society's shoulders.

When 50 Cent passes the song onto The Game, the image dissolves into a long shot of the latter standing in the middle of a basketball court. Unlike the court which appears in previous the Queens setting, this one is illuminated by the Los Angeles sun and lacks the confinement of a chain-link fence. In this final segment The Game ponders his newfound wealth, like his ability to pay his mother's rent or to buy her a new car. But this personal anecdote transitions into a more general rumination on the current state of the Los Angeles ghetto. We see

a shot of The Game sitting in his SUV as a plane passes overhead: “Thinkin’ how they spend 30 million dollars on airplanes/When there’s kids starvin’” (this line is somewhat ironic, of course, since The Game was, just moments earlier, reveling in his ability to travel by plane and is currently sitting in a brand new Range Rover). This segment of the song and video represents The Game’s own bid to be understood, not just as an “authentic” rapper, but also a socially conscious artist. Of course, these two goals overlap somewhat since The Game’s definition of authenticity is tied to 1990s gangsta rap, a genre committed to illuminating social injustices even as it flaunted material wealth, revenge killings and the objectification of women.

In the next shot The Game appears in his original “story teller” location, the rooftop from the video’s opening image, which is his location of narrative control. He looks at the camera and raps “Pac is gone and Brenda’s still throwin’ babies in the garbage.” This line is a reference to Tupac Shakur’s single “Brenda’s Got a Baby” (1991), which tells the story of a 12-year-old girl who is molested and impregnated by her cousin. The song, which implicates both the girl’s family and society at large for the rampancy of teen pregnancy and its devastating consequences, particularly for inner city, African American teenagers, was Shakur’s debut solo single from his first album *2Pacalypse Now* (1991) and is one of his most politically conscious tracks. By including this allusion to Shakur’s work, The Game is lamenting the fact that 13 years later, the ghetto conditions which inspired “Brenda’s Got a Baby” remain unchanged, despite the fact that rap music is more widespread and influential than ever. I believe that this line is likewise a reference to the state of hip hop in general, that the genre of gangsta rap, which initially held the promise of creating a widespread awareness about the problems in the nation’s ghettos, has become mere posturing, ineffective and obsolete. The whole of *The Documentary*

is nostalgia-heavy for this period in rap history and The Game is clearly positioning himself as the artist who can revive this genre.

Along those lines, the next verse contains a similar allusion to a past history of socially conscious music: “I wanna know what’s goin’ on like I hear Marvin/ No school books, they use that wood to build coffins.” Here The Game aligns himself with Marvin Gaye, specifically with his socially conscious album and single of the same name, *What’s Going On* (1971), which addressed the themes of drug abuse, poverty and the Vietnam War. Again, The Game is overtly stating his desire to create music which is both socially engaging but also critically and commercially successful.<sup>250</sup> During this section of the video, when The Game is rapping about starving children, unwed mothers and the importance of education, we see several brief shots of groups of children, who smile and face the camera. Unlike the children appearing in the video’s “flashback” sequences, these kids do not don gang colors and are not engaged in delinquent behaviors. Rather, they represent innocence and the future that must be preserved and protected. Thus, after illuminating these critical social issues, “Hate it or Love it” provides the viewers with hope for the future, much as the social problem film does. Nevertheless, like the social problem film, viable solutions are not offered by the text. Rather, the video exposes problems and then provides the listener/viewer with comforting images that pacify the desire for real social change.

The video also contains traces of the gangster genre, both its classical cycle (1930-1935) as well as its earlier, melodramatic cycle from the 1920s. Like the classical gangster hero, The Game revels in the power that comes with his newfound wealth. When he was a lowly street hustler the police were able to frame him for drug possession and he was the target of

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<sup>250</sup> *What’s Going On* sold over two million copies upon its initial release and is considered one of the landmark recordings in pop music history.

surveillance and harassment (“Used to see 5-0 throw the crack by the bench”).<sup>251</sup> But with his growing status in the rap community and sudden wealth, the ability of the cops to torment him has diminished (“Now I’m fuckin’ with 5-0, it’s all startin’ to make sense”). As he raps this line we see a medium close up of two white cops slowly driving by The Game’s house. This particular shot, a signifier of the constant surveillance of black males within the context of the ghetto action cycle (see *Boyz N the Hood*, *Menace II Society*, *New Jersey Drive* [1995, Nick Gomez], etc.), is revised. Rather than smirking or making threatening gestures, the cops nod and wave to The Game—they are not present to watch The Game but rather, to watch over and protect *his property*. This shot is followed by the Game presenting a new Mercedes Benz to his mother: “My mom’s happy she ain’t gotta pay the rent/And she got a red bow on the brand new Benz.” This ability to provide family members, particularly the devoted single mother, with material comforts (a new house, car, etc) is another trope of the classic gangster cycle, signifying the hero’s rise to the top. This segment also subtly references how upward mobility affects the way the gangsta is treated by the local police.

“Hate it or Love it,” is also strongly tied to the tradition of the melodramatic gangster cycle. While the majority of the video details the hardships of The Game’s childhood in Compton and his consequent decision to turn to a life of crime, the final third, as I mentioned, shows the rapper in a meditative mindset, returning to this locus of poverty and crime, with the hope that change is possible. Though he clearly revels in the trappings of his newfound wealth (the expensive watches, the Range Rover, the private jet), the song significantly concludes with his feelings of gratitude for the way his life has turned out “Whenever I’m in the booth and I get exhausted/I think what if Marie Bank had got that abortion/I love ya Ma’.” As he raps this line

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<sup>251</sup> “5-0” is slang for “police,” as in “Hawaii 5-0.”

the video cuts from a close up on The Game wearing a black bandana to a shot of a young boy, wearing the same bandana, looking dreamily out of the window of car. In other words, when his current career becomes a strain and his thoughts turn to the possibility of returning to a life of crime, he thinks about his boyhood and how lucky he is to be alive, to have survived the streets, let alone his mother's womb. The video ends with a final redemptive image as well, duplicating the video's first image. The Game stands on top of the same building, with an idyllic blue skyline, complete with flying birds, behind him. In this shot, however, The Game holds a naked infant, his newborn son, up towards the sky. This image dissolves into a medium close up of The Game looking directly into the camera as his son sleeps on his shoulder. The cyclical nature of the video's narrative and imagery—from The Game's childhood to his son's childhood—implies both continuity and difference. He made mistakes growing up but has reformed “in the nick of time” so that the future, his son, will lead a different kind of life.

This video also reveals its ties to the JD teenpics of the 1950s through its overt fetishization of youth subcultural styles and reliance on conspicuous consumption to illustrate The Game's status and success. The video relies on the audience's understanding of both East Coast “b-boy” fashion and West Coast “gangsta” style, in order to locate 50 Cent and The Game in their respective environments. It is significant that 50 Cent dons a puffer vest (a quilted, down filled jacket) because these jackets, particularly in the 1980s, were strong signifiers of hip hop culture. This clothing choice, beyond its practicality for harsh New York winters, highlighted the ability of the working class New York b-boys to afford luxury items. Puffer jackets often cost \$200 or more, and so to wear one would indicate that he had money to spare. Likewise, The Game's decision to wear baggy jeans paired with several gold “dookie ropes” (thick, gold chains) serves a doubled purpose. First, these two items of clothing are identified with early

1990s gangsta style, with its emphasis on functionality (the roomy pants), a hardcore aesthetic (baggy pants are also a riff on loose-fitting prison uniforms) and conspicuous consumption. By displaying his wealth, the gangsta was able to visually signify his status as a drug dealer, since nobody living in the nation's ghettos in the late 1980s and early 1990s would have been able to make enough money to afford a gold chain (an unnecessary luxury), unless he was involved in the illegal drug trade (Bruzzi 110). As 1980s era rapper, Slick Rick explains "When I was growing up, I used to see niggas with chains that were dripping-to-their-knees-type shit. It would be enormous and crazy expensive. They would be by themselves sometimes [wearing all that jewelry] — a nigga wearing some shit like that, you *knew* he was dangerous" (qtd. in Reid). Similarly, Rapper Too Short recalls "I bought [my rope] right before [I went] on tour with N.W.A and Eazy-E. I said, 'I'm gonna need a big rope.' ... Everybody on tour had a big rope. You wasn't nothing if you ain't had your big rope. The bigger rope determines your status" (qtd. in Reid). Much as a ducktail and a pair of blue jeans signified the deviant status of a teenager in the 1950s, the gold chain was an instant signifier of the gangsta in the 1980s and 1990s.

However, The Game's donning of gold chains is also a self-conscious move, referencing the general trend towards nostalgia for 1980s and early 1990s era rap music in the contemporary hip hop community. Southern crunk rapper I'll Jon explains:

We love the old school...Everybody got pleasant memories of the '80s. That's when hip-hop was fresh and new, it was like a baby. All those pleasant memories, we trying to bring back. I grew up seeing the Slick Ricks and Big Daddy Kanes, but I was a kid — I couldn't get no big-ass rope chain. I'm grown, I can do that now. (qtd. in Reid)

In the 1980s, rappers began to wear gold chains in an effort to connote both the criminality, and therefore the machismo, of the hustler community, but also as a form of visual bravado. By wearing these gold ropes The Game is thus highlighting his status in the rap community, but is doing so via signifiers from hip hop's past; he is defining himself by the standards of his forbearers. Those who recognize this nod to the past will have their knowledge of hip hop's history validated, while simultaneously validating The Game's authenticity as an inheritor of hip hop's crown. Of course, as I pointed out in Chapter 3, what is fascinating about the deployment of subcultural style in teen-targeted products, such as films, music videos and magazines, is that in order for these images to perform the function required of them, that is, to signify a contemporary subculture, they must be read and understood by a mainstream youth market (including primarily whites, blacks and Latinos). As Stella Bruzzi explains in *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies*: "the guiding paradox of many black street styles is that, whilst their distinctiveness proclaims the wearers' difference from the normative, white hegemonic model, the effectiveness of such looks is dependent on being instantly recognized as a member of a group, gang or subculture by those both in and outside it" (109).

Finally, like the blaxploitation film, "Hate it or Love it" is invested in creating and selling a particular image of contemporary black "authenticity." This authenticity is primarily created through the video's emphasis on location and the local. The video's inclusion of shots of specific locations in Queens and Compton, some of which would only be recognizable to residents of those areas or to fans that have made themselves familiar with the home turf of their favorite rappers, act as a "reward" to those "in the know." Not everyone will understand the import of "Nickerson Gardens," thus making this knowledge exclusive and

therefore, only for “real” fans who have immersed themselves in the hip hop culture. According to Bordieu:

In a sense, one can say that the capacity to see (*voir*) is a function of the knowledge (*savoir*), or concepts, that is, the words that are available to name visible things, and which are, as it were, programmes for perception. A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded. (2)

The enjoyment of the contemporary hip hop video in general and “Hate it or Love it” in particular, is tied to the viewer’s knowledge (*savoir*), having meaning only for those with the appropriate cultural competence. Clearly, my deployment of Bordieu’s terminology is somewhat different from the way he initially intended them. Bordieu is referring to a cultivated taste for art, a way of seeing that is bestowed on an individual by way of his/her social standing. However, the fan of hip hop music has many parallels with Bordieu’s *mondain*; their knowledge is something that has not been “taught,” but rather *acquired* via cultural contact. And both take pride in the fact that their knowledge was acquired in this fashion. Their taste, their ability to recognize the significance of certain elements in a work of art, functions as a marker of their status (in society, in the hip hop community, etc). In this way, the video’s use of symbolic, multilayered imagery heightens the text’s authenticity but also weeds out *poseurs* (or to use Bordieu’s terminology, pedants), that is, individuals who lack the cultural competency necessary for fully comprehending the text’s dense meanings. The video’s use of specific, local references alerts those in the know that its pleasures are only available to authentic fans, just as an appreciation of high art can only be appropriately accessed by the *mondain*. These references are understood naturally and instantly. The scholar or pedant (like myself), by contrast, can only

access this knowledge through study, which makes up for the time s/he did not spend immersed in hip hop culture. In this case, learning is an “equalizer” bestowing “taste” to everyone (Bourdieu 71). Of course, this type of knowledge is coded as less authentic within the hip hop community, much as the knowledge of the scholar or pedant carries less social prestige than that of the *mondain*.

Furthermore, Paula Massood points out that a major defining feature of the blaxploitation cycle was its emphasis on the “black ghetto chronotope,” images that could be recognized by the initiated and uninitiated alike: “The spatiotemporal parameters of the filmic ghetto were framed by an almost near-obsession with providing details of the cityscape...More important, part of what gave black ghetto films [of the 1970s] their impact was their inclusion of clearly identifiable urban, black monuments, even to uninitiated audiences” (85). Such moments were used to create an aura of “authenticity,” firmly locating blaxploitation films within a contemporary black milieu. The major difference, however, between the blaxploitation cycle’s use of these landmarks and their appearance in a video like “Hate it or Love it,” is that the latter deploys this imagery, not to mark its contemporaneity, but rather, its links with the past. This past is both actual and virtual. In other words, these locations create an aura of authenticity in the video both by linking the actual childhoods of the rappers to specific neighborhoods (Jamaica and Compton) but also by linking The Game’s star persona to an irretrievable, virtual past: South Central Los Angeles in the early 1990s. The Game wants to identify himself with the origins of gangsta rap and the ghetto action cycle, in order to claim himself as the new “heir apparent to the West Coast gangsta rap throne” (Fiore). Thus while the urbanscape of the blaxploitation cycle was deployed to signify a “presentness” (Massood 88) tied to notions of authenticity, the

urbanscape of “Hate it or Love it” signifies a “pastness,” which is the only way to achieve the particular brand of authenticity that the Game is after.

Authenticity is also created in “Hate it or Love it” through an emphasis on The Game’s past affiliations with gang life. While The Black Wallstreet’s mission statement mentions that they are invested in both gang intervention as well as the social development of the hip hop community, goals which support the social commentary appearing at the video’s conclusion, this mission actively contradicts star persona projected by The Game both in certain parts of the video as well as in press interviews and his other music projects. For example, the first line of The Game’s first verse in “Hate it or Love it” describes how his car is outfitted for street combat: “On the grill of my lowrider/Guns on both sides, right above the gold wires” and later he claims “I stay strapped like car seats.” In other words, the Game is always armed and ready for a potential violent attack. Likewise, The Game recently appeared on the cover of *Murder Dog*, a hip hop magazine covering primarily gangsta and hard-core rap, dressed in all red (with a red bandana completing obscuring his face) while displaying the hand gestures of the Bloods. Below his hands are the words “The Game: Gangsta Rapper.” He also appeared on the cover of *The Source* wearing a red bandana.<sup>252</sup> These clothing choices were not arbitrary—a red bandana is the primary signifier of an individual’s membership in the Bloods. Furthermore, The Game references both of these magazine covers in the chorus to the appropriately titled song “Red Bandana” (2006): “On the front of *Murder Dog* (he wears a)/ On the cover of *The Source* you see (he wears a red bandana)/ The whole world knows (he wears a)/ Every nigga in the ‘hood know (he wears a red bandana).” Indeed, the impetus behind these lyrics is the highly publicized falling out between The Game and 50 Cent, which occurred not too long after the two

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<sup>252</sup> I have been able to find images of these covers but I have yet to find the exact date for each cover. I only know that they came out in the last two years.

rappers filmed the “Hate it or Love it” video. The song is intended as a response to 50 Cent’s own public claims denouncing The Game’s “street credibility.” Thus, while portions of The Game’s star text promote a prosocial, anti-violence message, he nevertheless resorts to promoting his “authenticity” through his links to violence and his gang background. How can The Game simultaneously be committed to ending gang violence while, at the same time, he promotes his own gang affiliations as proof of his cachet in the hip hop community?

As I argued in Chapter 4, a similar promotional technique was employed by the directors and studios behind the ghetto action cycle. While films like *Boyz N the Hood* and *Juice* contained prosocial messages about the importance of a college education, stable families and the rejection of guns and gangs, the studios promoting these films employed a sensational, violence-oriented marketing strategy. By replicating the stereotypes of black urban youth that were circulating in the popular imagination at the time, the studios were able to position the films of the ghetto action cycle as “authentic” precisely because they depicted these youths as violent, aggressive criminals. A similar form of doublespeak appears in The Game’s star persona. While his videos as well as the website for his posse, The Black Wallstreet, argue in favor of antiviolence and progressive social reform, these sentiments are actively contradicted both by the promotion of gang imagery in “Hate it or Love it” as well as his appearance, in gang colors, on the covers of several popular hip hop magazines. As with the ghetto action cycle, in order project an aura of authenticity, The Game had to (re)align himself with his violent past. The Game’s video certainly has a prosocial message but, in order to get people to hear this message, that is, to buy his records, he must promote the very aspects of his life that he now claims to reject.

### 5.3 CONCLUSIONS: A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO GENRE AND CYCLE THEORY

The impetus of this dissertation has been threefold. First, by applying various generic lenses or paradigms (the gangster film, the social problem film, the teenpic, the blaxploitation film and the music video), I have demonstrated the multiple ways in which the ghetto action cycle can be read and understood by audiences, reviewers and academics. The eye, conditioned by all of its previous moviewatching experiences as well as the public discourses surrounding any particular film, always has a wide range of interpretive choices in any particular viewing situation. In the case of this dissertation, each of the lenses I employed for reading the ghetto action cycle revealed some aspect of the cycle that the others did not, while obscuring other, potentially important meanings and images, and consequently rearranging hierarchies within the ghetto action cycle's corpus. As Rick Altman points out "many film genre terms seem more like a communicative covenant of silence than a reasoned description...Once the 'Western' button is pushed, we agree to disengage all other generic buttons" (141). One of my primary objectives in this dissertation has been to get around this dilemma, by engaging as many "buttons" as possible when conducting my analyses. So while the lens of the gangster film and the blaxploitation film bring *New Jack City* into the center of the ghetto action cycle's corpus, the other three lenses employed in this study (the social problem film, the teenpic and the music video) virtually exclude it. Likewise, the prominence of *Boyz N the Hood* in all five chapters testifies to the film's significance within the cycle as a foundational ghetto action text and a distillation of the cycle's primary concerns.

This dissertation has been an extension of the work of Rick Altman and Steve Neale, who have used historical and archival evidence to question and complicate the way genres

have traditionally been defined and used and to recognize the fluidity and mutability of generic terminology and categories. For while genres certainly do lend themselves to periods of stability and order, as examples of protean, growing art, they must, by nature, change and branch out over time. Some critics account for such change through models of “generic evolution,” but I have argued that these models are fairly rigid in their patterning, ignoring texts which do not fit within the model. While it is impossible to devise a methodology which completely accounts for every text associated with a particular genre, my multi-paradigmatic, cycle-based approach is a close approximation. My study revealed how a group of texts can have a cohesive set of generic characteristics, but also how these characteristics can also shift depending on the vantage point taken. Accordingly, these shifting criteria will also alter a genre’s corpus, which enables me to include and account for a much wider range of texts. A text which does not fit a particular lens does not need to be abandoned from the study, it merely needs the proper lens through which to view it.

In addition to opening up the multiplicity of meanings inherent in a single text, my alternate approach to genre study involved expanding the concept of film categorization beyond the traditional semantic/syntactic approach. Rick Altman first addressed this issue in *Film/Genre* when he argued in favor of a “semantic/syntactic/pragmatic” approach to genre, which moves beyond the study of a film’s surface meanings (*parole*) and its deep structure (*langue*), in order to bring in a third factor, the uses or applications of a film or genre:

Like reception study, a semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach refuses determinacy to textual structures taken alone, but in addition it acknowledges the difficulty of extracting those textual structures from the institutions and social habits that frame them and lend them the appearance of making meaning on their

own. While pragmatic analysis sometimes destabilizes meaning by showing just how dependent it is on particular uses of a text or genre, at other times it succeeds in revealing the meaning-grounding institutions that make meaning seem to arise directly out of semantics and syntax. (Altman 211)

Pragmatics, the “use factor” of genres, demands that we understand these films, not just as sets of images and themes, but as texts that are *used*—by audiences, producers, exhibitors and even cultural agencies (Altman *Film/Genre* 210). I see the project of this dissertation as being an application of Altman’s innovative, pragmatic approach to genre study (but applied to cycles). I show how films should be grouped together based on more than just their aesthetic, thematic and philosophical readings. Instead I demonstrate how films might also be grouped together based on similar marketing strategies; reading the ghetto action cycle through this lens is revealing of how films are often sold based on the qualities they presumably share with other films, even if viewing the films reveals that they have little in common. For example, *New Jack City* and *Boyz N the Hood* are, generically speaking, very different films. The former is a slick, star studded action film punctuated with bright colors and violent set pieces while the latter is a *verité* style coming of age tale, filmed in the golden hues of the South Central Los Angeles sun, culminating in one tragic moment of intense violence. Certainly both films address the problems faced by inner city dwellers and feature primarily black casts, but the same could be said of films as diverse as *Bush Mama* (1979, Haile Gerima), *Daddy’s Little Girls* (2007, Tyler Perry) and *Purple Rain* (1984, Albert Magnoli). What really links *New Jack City* and *Boyz N the Hood* is the way in which they were marketed to audiences (as films so authentic that the violence depicted on screen would somehow extend into the theater audience) and the way in which they were received by those audiences (as part of a black film boom, as films centering on images of

violent black males). These readings have only a tangential relationship with the films themselves (i.e., their semantics and syntax), however they tell us quite a bit about their function and purpose at the time of their release (i.e., their pragmatic use).

While I do not believe that this dissertation offers a complete remedy to the problems inherent in any genre study (such as the empiricist dilemma, the desire for a stable corpus and a linear model of change, etc.), it does provide an alternate approach to traditional genre studies. The empiricist dilemma and the need to work with “pure” texts are endemic to genre study since they are, by definition, what genre study is all about—the ordering of chaos. What my dissertation aims to do is to develop another method for discussing films as a group that illuminates how genres and cycles are “site[s] of struggle and co-operation among multiple users” (Altman *Film/Genre* 211). This dissertation proposes that while it is useful to study how and why a group of films comes to share a similar semantics and syntax, analyzing other shared elements—including industrial conditions, marketing approaches, target audiences and/or historical influences—offers an alternative, more varied understanding of a particular film. For example, from a strictly generic point of view, *Menace II Society* falls into the genre of the gangster film. When we view *Menace II Society* through this particular generic lens then certain key characteristics of this text are pulled to the surface, including: the enduring theme of the individual versus society, the focus on the Other as social enemy, the tragic flaw of wanting too much and living in the moment that has plagued cinematic gangsters since *Little Caesar*’s Rico Bandello wondered “Mother of Mercy, is this the end of Rico?” Here, approaching the film from the vantage point of traditional genre studies has served several useful purposes. It connects an individual text to a long, rich history of uniquely American themes (the ritual function) but also reveals how films work to perpetuate certain assumptions about which Americans are entitled to

material and social success (the ideological function). The lens or paradigm of genre how certain stories are timeless, resonating with each new generation and speaking to their needs (a synchronic view), but also how genres grow and “evolve” over time to suit their audiences (a diachronic view).

And yet, so much more can be said of *Menace II Society*, not as an individual film, but as a film existing in relation to several different groups of films which are dipping from a similar visual, thematic, cultural and economic pool. If *Menace* is understood as being part of a cycle of teen-targeted films exploiting contemporary subcultural behaviors, in the mold of the 1950s teenpic, then an entire other history of this film is illuminated, namely *why* it was made. This lens reveals how *Menace's* *raison d'être* as well as its box office success were predicated on mainstream society's concern over the presumed criminality of black inner city youth and the contemporary teenagers desire to consume and mimic hip hop related products. These aspects of *Menace's* production and reception history are significant but also overshadowed when the film is analyzed from a purely generic perspective. And if we understand this film as a cyclical descendent of the blaxploitation film, as a film that exists primarily because of its marketing potential, because of the way in which it can be promoted in a sensational manner, then we can understand how and why producers chose to market it as a dangerous, “realistic” view of gang life (rather than as a gangster film). Again, this aspect of the film remains hidden if it is solely viewed as a modern day example of the classic gangster film. Thus, in addition to providing these multiple readings, a cycle-based approach to genre study illuminates how a film might have multiple competing histories.

The second goal of this dissertation has been to illuminate the significance of the film cycle, its function within popular culture and its centrality to genre studies. I argue that

although film cycles are underexamined, they are crucial to our understanding, not just of how studios choose their next project, but also of cinema's ability to translate the contemporary into popular entertainment. All genres, I believe, would benefit from being studied in terms of their cycles, rather than as unchanging monoliths which, once defined, never deviate from the critic's initial definition. Each lens I employed for reading the ghetto action cycle also illuminated an aspect of cycle studies and its potential function in genre studies as a whole. In Chapter 1 I argued that the gangster film cannot be accurately read as a single genre; rather, viewing it through its various cycles provides a more historically accurate picture of the films within its corpus (i.e., not all gangster films fit the classic model established by *Little Caesar*) as well as its generic descendents. This model does not privilege one group of texts as being the most "central" in a genre's corpus, but rather views each cycle within that genre as attending to the changing needs of the audience and the film industry. In Chapter 2, I demonstrated how film cycles often form around a particular contemporary "social problem," such as the plight of juvenile delinquents. I argue that the process described as generic evolution simply involves a new cycle developing within a genre in response to a particular social trigger, such as the onset of war. I also used this chapter to explain how even a cycle can and must change its semantics and/or syntax over a period of time in order to remain financially viable. This model of change cannot be reduced to the conventional model of generic evolution since each cycle undergoes different variations depending on what it was to begin with. Thus, the ghetto action cycle did eventually end in comedy and parody, but it never experienced the other stages of evolution (experimental, classical and baroque) thought to be so standard in genre studies. In Chapter 3, I analyzed the symbiotic relationship between cycles and subcultures. That is, I demonstrated how another key trigger for the formation of a film cycle is the choice to capitalize on the appearance

of a particular youth subculture, a marketing technique that would only become apparent to studios once the lucrative teenage demographic was “discovered” in the 1950s. To appeal to the youth market, studios realized that they had to tap into youth interests. While this conclusion is fairly obvious to even the most casual observer of popular culture, what is less recognized is the integral role a film cycle can play in the discovery, definition and destruction of a subculture. Film cycles were made in response to subcultures but subcultures consequently became disseminated and understood *via* their depiction in film cycles. The study of film cycles thus reveals another way in which subcultures and the so-called mainstream culture are highly dependent upon each other. Finally, in Chapter 4, I demonstrated how contemporary definitions of and concerns about race and race relations can lead to the formation and demise of a film cycle. Both the blaxploitation and ghetto action cycles were created and marketed in relation to contemporary definitions of urban “blackness.” These definitions played into the belief systems of black and non-black audiences alike. Much like the relationship between subcultures and cycles, I used this chapter to demonstrate how contemporary stereotypes and concerns over racial identities can be exploited to create a cycle and how, in turn, a cycle can serve to shape these stereotypes and concerns. Film cycles become a part of the public discourse on race relations and are so interwoven into the popular imagination that their images and themes can, in hindsight, stand in for reality (e.g. when people think of urban blacks circa 1970, images from blaxploitation films invariably come to mind).

The third and final goal of this chapter has been to re-investigate the histories of these various film cycles, to look at the way they were understood at the time of their release and the way they have been understood in hindsight, in order to discern how or why they accumulated their status as “bad,” low-brow, primitive, marginal, or even offensive, cultural

objects. My interest in these various cycles is tied to a questioning of why these films have remained in the shadows of the film canon, linked to bad taste. As Paul Watson points out: “One stultifying result of the system of aesthetic discrimination that underpins notions of cultural distinction is that it tends to exclude, or at least marginalize [exploitation or trash films] on the grounds that [they are] futile or unworthy of critical attention” (69-70). As I argued in my introduction, all of the films examined in this dissertation have been neglected (D2D releases), marginalized (melodramatic gangster films), ignored (teenpics, the Dead End Kids cycle) and/or criticized (blaxploitation films, ghetto action films) based on their inability to conform to contemporary definitions of “good” taste or propriety. I am defining “bad taste” broadly as: those texts which do not require an accumulation of cultural capital in order to be enjoyed/texts which do not require that their viewers master a particular code<sup>253</sup> in order to access its meanings and pleasures, texts dealing with unsavory topics such as criminality, the drug economy and violence and most obviously, texts which in the nakedly obvious desire to please appears as artless, simplistic or base.

Tracing an historical, cultural and theoretical genealogy for the ghetto action cycle has revealed this marginalized history while also illuminating how these films were able to make a lot of money, only to eventually come under attack and slowly disappear from the mainstream cinema landscape. However, as I have been attempting to argue, no film cycle ever truly “dies” or disappears. It may lie dormant or don a new surface, but much of its fundamentals—a key theme, an image, a character type, a setting—will continue to circulate in other films. There is no real “death” in the cinema, only dormancy. In this chapter I demonstrated how the hip hop music video represents the current “resting place” of the ghetto

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<sup>253</sup> Thus, I would not place the contemporary hip hop music video under this heading since it does require mastery of a particular code in order to properly read and enjoy it.

action cycle. It is therefore fitting that a film cycle which found its primary inspiration in the narratives of gangsta rap would find in the music video in its most viable contemporary form. Certainly traces of the cycle are found in other popular culture products, such as the D2D release, the occasional all black cast teen film (*Love Don't Cost a Thing* [2003, Troy Beyer]), the rapper biography (*Get Rich or Die Tryin'* [2005, Jim Sheridan]) and, in a more limited form, in certain narrative threads of television dramas (*The Wire* [2002- ], *Oz* [1997-2003]). However, the music video is, I believe, the most viable trajectory for the ghetto action cycle since it encompasses so much of the cycle's central concerns.

To conclude, this project reveals how film cycles—an industrial strategy dating back to the origins of cinema—are a useful object of inquiry both within and outside the discipline of film studies. As I have shown, cycles can serve as a cross section of one moment in time, and consequently, the study of cycles, rather than the study of a single film or the study of a much broader genre, is poised to accurately reveal much about the state of contemporary politics, prevalent social ideologies, aesthetic trends and popular desires and anxieties; after all, a film cycle will not exist unless the public has demonstrated that they are very interested its subject, themes and/or styles. For example, the cycle of torture-themed horror films which have surfaced through the early 2000s, including *Saw* (2004, James Wan) and *Hostel* (2005, Eli Roth) are clearly linked to burgeoning anxieties over the atrocities committed in and as a result of America's ongoing war in Iraq, but also, to the availability of images of real-life torture and death, such as the recorded and widely circulated executions of Daniel Pearl in 2002 and Saddam Hussein in 2006. The pervasiveness of these images of “torture porn” begs the question: does this cycle, as well as television programs like *24* (2001- ), serve as a critique of the desire to consume bodily misery or is the proliferation of these texts simply another means of satisfying

this desire? I believe that the study of cycles offers new ways of understanding how the popular imagination interprets such moments of social and cultural anxiety, and how the film, television, music and media industries in general seek to both shape and capitalize upon these interpretations.

In promoting the validity and use of cycle studies the goal of this dissertation has not been to abandon traditional approaches to genre study. Genre study is capable of unearthing how films rely and build upon the semantics established by earlier films, and in so doing, build a visual shorthand for making meaning in cinema. Genre study likewise reveals how certain basic themes, such as the individual versus society or wilderness versus civilization, are universal enough to resonate with audiences as easily in 1907 as they do in 2007, and what aspects of a film's semantics must be altered in order to make that one hundred year leap. The repetition of the same themes over and over also points to the ideological function of genres, in that they continue, decade after decade, to reinforce the status quo. Finally, genre study highlights the relationship between a film text, the audience, and the film's producers, revealing how these forces work together and rely upon each other for the creation and circulation of meanings. For all of these reasons and more, genre study must not be abandoned. What I have proposed is a complementary approach to categorizing films, one that accounts for a wider variety of factors and criteria. In so doing, I hope to not only provide a more user-based understanding of film groupings but also to reinvigorate the discipline of genre studies in general.

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