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Menacing Society: An exploration of the hood sub-genre

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Introduction

“The black movie boom of the 1990s has materialised out of a climate of long-muted black frustration and anger over the worsening political and economic conditions that African-Americans continue to endure in the nation’s decaying urban centres” (Guerrero, 1993, 159)

In the early 1990s, films made by African-Americans about the African-American experience reached unprecedented numbers. Paula J. Massood has identified this wave as ‘hood films’ (2012, 232), with Courtney George defining them as films about the “racial and socio-economic-spurred violence associated with coming-of-age as a young black man in an inner-city hood in urban centres” (2011, 47). With a focus on criminality and organised crime, hood films form a sub-genre of gangster films and this study seeks to understand its identity in relation to a range of issues pertinent to the socio-political environment of 1990s America. It is especially concerned with: questions of ‘blackness’; the relationship of these films to the broader historical dimensions of the gangster genre; and, the representation of African-Americans within the industrial and creative contexts of Hollywood film production. Consideration of each of these elements is fundamental to the central issues concerned, which is understanding these films at both an industrial and critical level. The analysis will be conducted through two key case studies which offer significant variation upon the sub-genre: *Set It Off* (Gray, 1996) and *Paid in Full* (Stone III, 2002). Each offer something fresh to the scholarly discussion of the sub-genre, especially considering the relative lack of attention afforded *Paid in Full*, allowing the thesis to explore further issues of gender representation. These case studies enable an examination of a range of issues present within the sub-genre, including portrayals of race, gender and sexuality, and systematic, commercial and economic exclusions.

As S. Craig Watkins argues, “[these] films wrestled with some of the most prominent issues – poverty, drugs, homicidal violence, idleness and alienation – associated with the changing state of poor youth and the communities they inhabited” (2002, 243). This engagement allows for a debate on whether these films sensationalise and exploit the ghetto, or if they are sympathetic to authentic struggles. Watkins claims this cycle “was Hollywood’s attempt to exploit the growing popularity of hip-hop culture” (2002, 239), and it is important to properly contextualise Hollywood’s importance to this cycle’s gradual proliferation in mainstream culture, despite a previous history of marginalising

black popular cultural representations. Another important factor is the issue of the cycle's economic success. As Sheril D. Antonio states, "contemporary African-American cinema's ability to sustain itself in strictly financial terms is critical to its development, growth, and continued existence" (2002, 2). Textual analysis of the case studies is therefore important, both in highlighting the relationship between African-American filmmakers and Hollywood, and in understanding what it takes for them to coexist fruitfully. Massood indicates the fickle relationship that exists between these seemingly disparate parties, commenting that "[Hollywood is] an industry geared toward maximum profit for minimal risk, and where a formula, such as the hood films, will be replicated as long as it turns a profit" (2012, 246). This apparent conflict will be explored further in relation to varied socio-cultural contexts of the 1990s, and whether it comes at the cost of sensationalising people of colour.

The identity of the hood film within the parameters of the gangster genre allows for debate regarding the application of genre conventions and the ideological assumptions underlying them. Maria Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis claim that genres consist of "a group of films that share a set of narrative, stylistic and thematic characteristics or conventions" (2008, 374). Further to this, Steve Neale argues that "genre itself is a multi-faceted phenomenon" (2002, 2) and it will be useful to determine both noteworthy changes *and* adherences within the hood films under consideration. As Neale continues,

"Genres can be approached from the point of view of the industry and its infrastructure, from the point of view of their aesthetic traditions, from the point of view of the broader socio-cultural environment upon which they draw and into which they feed, and from the point of view of audience understanding and response" (ibid.).

The so-called hood film can be identified as a sub-genre and a genre cycle. The term sub-genre generally refers to specific traditions or groupings within these genres (such as 'romantic comedy' and 'gothic horror') (Neale, 2000, 7). According to Neale, cycles are "groups of films made within a specific and limited time-span" (ibid.), making the term applicable to this sub-genre as it peaked in popularity and production in the early-mid 1990s. It is difficult to be certain how many hood films exist as the sub-genre continues today, and many examples like *Corrupt* (Pyun, 1999) were

distributed straight-to-video, but by my own calculations, there are at least one hundred films which belong to the sub-genre.

The developments of the hood film are bound by the history of the gangster film in general. Fran Mason is one of the many authors cited throughout this thesis who uses the term 'hood film' and identifies it as a sub-genre of the gangster film. He calls the hood film cycle "a group of gangster films that utilises this spectacle of postmodern violence and recodes it in terms of urban realism" (2002, 154). Indeed, the categorisation of this set of films as a gangster film sub-genre labelled the 'hood film' is not of my own invention. Furthermore, how these films relate to the gangster genre (namely through intertextuality and structuring) will be explored throughout the chapters. The sub-genre's conventions will be particularly useful in analysing *Set It Off*. This is a rare hood film about a group of black women drawn into a criminal life, and especially worth discussing due to the dearth of representation for black women in this sub-genre. Massood comments that "like much of the print and television journalism from the time, the African-American film boom of the early 1990s focused almost exclusively on the condition of urban black men" (2012, 232). Women were largely absent as leading characters, usually relegated to "inconsequential background" (ibid.), compounding the purpose for analysing how *Set It Off* is gendered. The film is also notable for its genre hybridity, as it not only fits within the hood cycle, but also relates to what Karen Hollinger (1998) refers to as 'female friendship films'. The concept of 'hypermasculinity', referring to an adoption of extreme machismo, is something which often comes through in these films. According to Matt C. Zaitchik and Donald L. Mosher, hypermasculinity is exemplified by three distinct characteristics, "(a) the view of violence as manly, (b) the view of danger as exciting, and (c) callous sex attitudes toward women" (1993, 232). As explored in Chapter Three, the character of Rico (Cam'ron) in *Paid in Full* appeals to these characteristics.

When this discussion addresses 'race', it is framed within the critical understanding that it is a social construct and not a biological one. Robert W. Sussman provides a strong frame of reference for the concept of race, arguing that it is not a "biological reality" (2014, 305) but a racist human design

which has become part of our cultural history and our everyday reality. Similarly, Gladstone Yearwood's definition of blackness forms the basis for an understanding and application of the concept hereon, contesting that "for many people blackness is less a colour than a metaphor for political circumstances prescribed by struggles against economic exploitation and cultural domination" (2000, 5). According to Yearwood, blackness stands for something more than pigmentation, becoming rather a set of oppressive circumstances experienced by people of colour, circumstances explored here through their manifestation in hood films depicting the inner-city life of young black men *and* women.

The critical analysis will be underpinned by scholarly literature throughout. Chapter One explores pervasive and often stereotypical images of African-Americans in Hollywood throughout the twentieth century to illustrate the conflict between integration and vilification for African-Americans. Given the space restrictions, this historical overview can only be explored succinctly. The conflict between integration and vilification was magnified by the immediate and tumultuous socio-historical context of 1990s America. As Ed Guerrero commented, "for African-Americans, then, the last decade of the century reveals a renewed sense of racial oppression and foreclosure, pessimism, and sinking social expectations" (1993, 160), framing the issues within a very specific socio-political and historical context. Hood films arrived amid the unlawful beating of Rodney King by L.A. policemen, and Henry G. Cisneros argues that "the white-hot intensity that became Los Angeles was the combustion of smouldering embers waiting impatiently to ignite for a long time" (1993, 19). However, despite the seemingly fractured racial climate, black popular culture was thriving prior to the emergence of the sub-genre in the early 1990s. As Watkins comments, "two of the most successful forms of commercial culture since the mid-1980s have both been associated with the urban ghetto: basketball and hip-hop culture" (2002, 249). These are central to the iconography of the sub-genre, usually present in the films' soundtracks, costuming, locations or casting choices (as in both key case studies). To allow for comparative analyses, the narrative codes of the hood film will be outlined in relation to the industrial or ideological factors informing their development and articulation. A key factor for exploration is the relationship between hood films and the gangster genre. The 1930s set

of gangster films will prove especially important for analysis, as their often-adopted structure of the rise-and-fall narrative is used by many hood films. The hood films chosen for analysis often contain explicit intertextual references to other gangster films which influenced them.

This will prove useful for Chapter Two, which analyses *Set It Off*, a film about desperate inner-city black women who turn to bank robbery. This film was chosen because, as previously mentioned, it is a rare example of a hood film focused on the lives of women, therefore offering the chance to explore representations of gender and sexuality within the sub-genre. This section seeks to understand if a feminist hood film is possible considering the sub-genre's marginalisation of women. Sharon Willis argues that the role of women in hood films is not coincidental, commenting that "these films depend on and perpetuate the representational marginalisation of black women" (1997, 161). The economic situations of the women in *Set It Off* provides insight into the lives of impoverished African-American women during this period, using these to justify their criminality. This is a significant focus in the chapter, as each woman's different economic difficulties are explored. Such issues as workplace discrimination, which affects Frankie (Vivica A. Fox), and a lack of welfare opportunities for black single mothers, which affects Tisean (Kimberly Elise), are explored. Cleo (Queen Latifah) is particularly worthy of specific analysis as she is a butch-lesbian operating in a predominantly masculine space (**See Fig. 1**). Judith Halberstam argues that the character's black female masculinity is "infused with racial and class dynamics" (1998, 229), rendering her masculinization a particular form of abjected female identity. Cleo's identity and function in the narrative is a fruitful way of confronting the masculine conventions of hood films. There is also consideration of the film's genre hybridity.

Chapter Three focuses on *Paid in Full*, analysing it in various ways. The film has been chosen as a key case study because of the dearth of scholarship surrounding it. It was chosen in preference to other hood films because of the potential for an original intervention into the established literature around this subject. The film shares a heavily intertextual relationship with the gangster genre, even referencing some of the same films as *Set It Off*. The relationship between the two films does not

simply exist in the mise-en-scène, but also through characters such as Rico, who mirrors certain gangster archetypes that *Set It Off* tends to confound. Whereas *Set It Off* focuses primarily upon feminine representations (regardless of Cleo's persona), multiple characterisations in *Paid in Full* are founded upon a projection of wealth and masculine potency. Each of the three main characters of *Paid in Full* are afforded depth of critical analysis, exploring how they project their own identities publicly, such as how Mitch (Mekhi Phifer) relies on material goods to create his persona. The film's popular nightclub setting is described as a "stage", thus alluding to the performative aspect of the film's spaces. Although set in 1980s Harlem, the film is acutely aware of the context in which it was made, particularly in its criticisms of 'studio gangsters' (rappers who are pretending to have lived the 'gangsta' lifestyle in their music) in the 2000s (**See Fig. 2**). This criticism is juxtaposed with what the viewer has been exposed to as a lived reality in the film's 1980s setting, and it also muddles the film's largely critical stance on this lifestyle. Despite varying degrees of sensationalism, the case studies are heavily informed and structured through a reliance on classical genre conventions and an engagement with the tumultuous socio-economic environment faced by many impoverished and persecuted African-Americans in the 1990s. Exploring these issues in relation to the case studies forms a central part of the study's aim to unpack and examine the sub-genre.

Chapter One: Contextualising African-American representation, racial conflict and the hood sub-genre

A History of Exclusion and Stereotyping

Because hood films deal with the urban criminality of young African-Americans, it is important that this study should establish immediately a sense of the socio-historical relations between African-Americans, the Hollywood film industry and its audiences. As Carolyn Martindale argues, “negative stereotypes of African Americans have been deeply ingrained in Anglo American culture” (1996, 21). This demonization served ideological functions which Linus Abraham described as “a rationale for enslavement of blacks” (2003, 88). These enduring stereotypes relate to the ideological power of whiteness, which forms as a subconscious hegemonic assumption that white people are simply ‘people’ whereas people of other ethnicities are ‘others’ (Dyer, 1997, 2). According to Carlos E. Cortés, other ethnic groups were also “couched in criminal terms”; Italian-Americans have often been the leading cinematic immigrant criminals (**See Fig. 3**), alongside Latino drug dealers (*Scarface* (De Palma, 1983), Chinese immigrants (*Year of the Dragon* (Cimino, 1985)), Arab immigrant terrorists (*Wanted: Dead or Alive* (Sherman, 1987)) (2010, 361-362). Abraham contests that American newscasts seemed to perpetuate these perceptions of African-Americans to the public, commenting that “blacks are stereotypically portrayed as homeless, underclass, and poor, as drug lords and crack victims” (2003, 89). Similarly, Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki argue that the intertwining of ‘black person’ and ‘poverty’ in television news has skewed how white people perceive African-Americans” (2000, 30). This indicates that the enduring stereotypes of news portrayals are inevitably transferred to many fictional depictions onscreen. It is important to recognise the role of the news in what Abraham calls “[a perpetuation of] the historical vilification and stigmatization of African Americans” (2003, 90). This is significant not simply because of how African-Americans are represented, but also in terms of what it says about white consumers. As Mike Davis claims, while actual violence was confined to the ghetto, wars between rival gangs such as Los Angeles’ Bloods and Crips (**See Fig. 4**) provided a “voyeuristic titillation to white suburbanites devouring lurid imagery” in

the news (2006, 270). Davis suggests that a dislocation exists between the locales of African-Americans and white Americans, allowing some white viewers to consume news images of ghetto gang warfare with unsympathetic pleasure. The idea of whiteness is crucial when considering this consumption because, as Herman S. Gray argues, race was culturally “threatening and disruptive” to the invisible whiteness upon which the national imaginary depended (2005, 101). White suburban viewers arguably consumed this content voyeuristically due to the cultural dichotomy between both races. This complex relationship between media representations and socio-cultural reality is highlighted here to indicate that the media wielded a significant degree of power and influence in the perpetuation of negative stereotypes.

The role of the cinema in the articulation of these stereotypes further confused distinctions between fictional and non-fictional media forms. Entman and Rojecki point to one-dimensional images of “irresponsible and irrepressible black sexuality and criminality” (2000, 182). These images therefore reiterate a damaging portrayal of African-American criminality, often emphasising their supposedly threatening sexuality. Such representations are embedded in the history of popular American cinema. As Todd Boyd claims, “the most persistent threat of black masculinity has been murderous and sexual in nature, as *Birth of a Nation* [Griffith, 1915], the cornerstone of twentieth-century American film culture, demonstrates so vividly” (1997, 36). The film’s importance should not be underestimated, Donald Bogle arguing that it “altered the entire course and concept of American moviemaking”, before observing that these black antagonists were specifically coded according to myths of a primitive black sexuality which frequently lusted after white women (2001, 10-14). This can be seen explicitly when Elsie (Lillian Gish) is kidnapped and threatened by the sexual desires of a black lieutenant, Silas Lynch (George Siegmann) (**See Fig. 5**). Reaffirming *Birth’s* significance as both a cinematic landmark and a vehicle for perpetuating these stereotypes, Valerie Smith claims “[it] established codes of narrative film practice and circulated as truth a range of black stereotypes for record-breaking audiences” (1997, 1). The lack of opportunities for African-Americans in the studio system (see Guerrero, 1993, 182) means that mainstream images contrasting these stereotypes were rare.

According to Anna Everett, African-American filmmakers attempted to counter this dominant representation in the 1920s by embarking on their own independently produced 'race films'. These aspired to create more truthful depictions of the "customs and aspirations of the diverse black community" (2001, 108), creating a greater range of black characters and personalities on-screen. Thomas Cripps claims these films "presented black audiences with sharply etched messages of advocacy, aspiration, group unity, and slogans against racism" (1997, 47). However, as Antonio suggests, these independent filmmakers received little or no support (financial or otherwise), with only marginal recognition from the mainstream American film industry (2002, 1). Dan Moos identifies the advent of 'talkies' as the key turning point in this cycle. Sound films were much more expensive to make, so African-American filmmakers of this period such as Oscar Micheaux declared voluntary bankruptcy (2004, 1008). With sound films impacting the ability of African-American filmmakers to continue, Moos claims that Hollywood "invaded the territory of independent filmmakers like Micheaux" (ibid.) in order to tap into the black audience. It was for this reason that the movement did not last long into the 1930s, Novotny Lawrence attributing its demise to exhibitory, financial and audience issues (2008, 5-6). According to Moos (2004, 1008), as these films were generally made for black audiences, their relatively minor financial returns rendered them minor considerations for Hollywood filmmakers without any stake in their ideological value.

In the decades that followed, the importance of these issues increased. Lawrence states that "during the post-war years, the race issue became a prevalent theme in a group of motion pictures commonly referred to as social problem films" (2008, 11-12). According to Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy, social problem films combine social analysis and dramatic conflict within a coherent narrative structure, while social issues function as story material through a particular set of movie conventions (1981, viii). Lawrence identifies that a new 'consciousness' emerged after many WWII soldiers fought anti-semitism overseas and saw inequality in the United States when they came home. This caused films with more 'adult' themes to perform well at the box office (2008, 12-13), often engineered by the mainstream industry to appeal to the contemporary racial climate in America. Furthermore, Barbara Klinger suggests that films with adult themes were prominent due to several industrial

factors, including the medium's "competition with television" (1994, 38). Regarding the instant popularity of television nationwide, Lynn Spigel claims "between 1948 and 1955, television was installed in nearly two-thirds of the nation's homes" (1992, 1).

To illustrate this cycle, it is useful to explore it against a brief contextualisation of Sidney Poitier's screen persona, whose roles seemingly opposed the representational conventions established in *The Birth of a Nation*. Keith M. Harris labels him as "the most significant black star of post-WW II American film...[a] counter to the toms and coons tradition in that they were doctors [See Fig. 6], teachers, ordinary workers [etc.]" (2006, 61). Despite the immediate perception that these roles signalled a turning point for both African-American inclusion and progressiveness, they can also be perceived as equally troubling. Kevern Verney suggests that Poitier created a new Hollywood stereotype, "the ebony saint" (2003, 54), arguing that while this character type was intellectual, non-violent, and able to forgive his tormentors (ibid., 69), this also had other connotations. While Poitier could operate in positions of either authority or respectability, these characters did not drink, smoke, swear or have sexual relationships (ibid., 55). The purity associated with Poitier proves Hollywood's inability to accept his multiple racial implications, posing no threat to whiteness as law-abiding, controlled and assimilated characters. Poitier's persona marks a departure from previous images of murderous and sexual black masculinity (Boyd, 1997, 36), replaced by a figure engaged in neither sexual relations or civil disorder whose acceptance is founded partly upon a gracious forgiveness of his white tormentors, as explicitly seen in *No Way Out* (Mankiewicz, 1950).

This relates explicitly to the Civil Rights movement of the time. According to Bogle, during the 1960s, black unrest became a movement which "started with sit-ins, boycotts, and marches and ended with riots, demonstrations, and a series of horrifying assassinations" (2001, 195), and its impact upon the social problem film requires acknowledgment. As stated by Verney, "in the years 1945-65, developments in US popular culture reflected wider changes in race relations taking place across the nation" (2003, 63). This change was exemplified particularly by *In the Heat of the Night* (Jewison, 1967), in which Verney claims that the detective portrayed by Poitier "embodied an idealized white

vision of black civil rights campaigners as personified by Martin Luther King” (2003, 69). Poitier’s character slaps a racist white plantation owner, a literal and symbolic strike against racist oppression, yet this is undermined by the film’s stance on contemporary racial issues, which Verney suggests the film depicts as a Southern, rather than a national, problem (ibid.).

Black show business entertainers also had a place in Hollywood during this era. Louis Armstrong and Hazel Scott, for example, were prominent figures in 1930s and 1940s Hollywood, their abilities mainly deployed in easing “the tensions of a war-depressed nation” (Bogle, 2001, 121). Such entertainers were comfortably assimilated into Hollywood, as seen in *Every Day’s a Holiday* (Sutherland, 1937). Here, Armstrong appears in only one scene to lead a band at a parade, showcasing his capabilities in a single musical number for the white leading characters, the parade audience and the film’s audience. In the following decades, other black show business figures like Sammy Davis Jr. emerged. Davis rose to fame as a vaudeville act before joining the group of entertainers called the ‘Rat Pack’, who performed together on stage and on screen in films like *Ocean’s 11* (Milestone, 1960) (**See Figs. 7 and 8**). Bogle is highly critical of how Davis is used in these Rat Pack films, claiming he was “frequently used as a token figure...with racial jokes sometimes at Davis’ expense” (1988, 380). One such joke is in *Ocean’s 11* when the white members of the group are applying shoe polish to darken their complexions and Peter Lawford asks Davis, “how do you get this stuff off?” (**See Fig. 9**). Having only been in blackface briefly, Lawford already displays explicit contempt for having to abandon his whiteness. Davis’ resignation in this ethically troubling side of the group’s plan rings true to his tokenism. According to Bogle, Davis’ performance in these films alienated black movie patrons because of his position as the “showcase Negro”. (2001, 214). This form of assimilation indicates how conservative Hollywood was regarding the inclusion of black stars during this period, exemplified by Charlene Regester’s observation that black women were “erased, marginalised, and devalued” in Hollywood during the first half of the twentieth century (2010, 1). Despite the tokenism of figures like Armstrong and Davis, their crossover from musical stardom into acting links to the hood sub-genre’s usage of hip-hop music and rappers-cum-actors such as Tupac Shakur in *Juice* (Dickerson, 1992) and Queen Latifah in *Set It Off*. The marginality of black actresses on

screen emphasises Chapter Three's exploration of Latifah's character, Cleo, in *Set It Off* as a debatably radical departure from the commercial mainstream.

While roles inhabited by the likes of Poitier offered utopian Hollywood fantasies of integration (Harris, 2006, 60), the 1970s saw the birth (and subsequent demise) of Blaxploitation. Smith provides a useful summary of the predominant formula of these films: "inner cities as context, drug and gang violence as themes, and rhythm and blues as the sound track" (1997, 3). Indeed, Isaac Hayes' *Shaft* (1971), Curtis Mayfield's *Super Fly* (1972), James Brown's *Black Caesar* (1973) scores became central to the marketability of these films, pre-empting the crossover potential of utilising hip-hop in hood films. Kara Keeling comments that "Curtis Mayfield's soundtrack to *Super Fly* sold over a million units in 1972 and Isaac Hayes's soundtrack for *Shaft* earned \$2 million dollars within weeks of the film's release" (2007, 102). Watkins suggests that the success of Blaxploitation soundtracks proved a market for black-themed films could be built and sustained (2002, 241).

While the social problem films capitalised on the Civil Rights movement, Blaxploitation was influenced by the Black Power movement, which, as Amy A. Ongiri suggests "revolved around the notion of economic independence and cultural self-determination" (2010, 2). The Blaxploitation films foreground this imperative both in industrial and textual terms. As Verney claims, Blaxploitation films finally allowed African-Americans to play strong leading roles and triumph over white adversaries (2003, 84), while William R. Grant states that "Blaxploitation films showed real signs of promise and hope for challenging the stereotypes as well introducing new types of characters and storylines" (2004, 2). Like the earlier social problem films, Blaxploitation seemingly deviated from the stereotyping perpetuated in both fictional and non-fictional American media, its apparent progressiveness partly due to their racial dichotomies. However, as Chapter Two will explore, these films occasionally dealt with issues of sexuality and female representation in troubling ways. *The Mack* (Campus, 1973) depicted a sexualised and extravagantly-dressed pimp (**See Fig. 10**), its narrative of women as erotic commodities to be obtained and controlled. Films such as this reinforce the 'exploitation' label attached to this set of films, where progression in racial dichotomies appears

alongside new stereotypes of black sexuality. According to Verney, the heroes of Blaxploitation films lived life on the edge, coolly overcoming regular physical danger, yet able to find time for innumerable casual sexual relationships with beautiful women of all races. They lived by their own moral code, taking pride in his ethnic background (2003, 83), while roles for white actors tended to be villainous. Verney suggests that “white characters usually appeared only briefly...If given more substantive roles they played racists who met their come-uppance at the hands of the black star” (ibid.). These ‘black stars’ include Richard Roundtree, Jim Brown, Fred Williamson, Rudy Ray Moore. Curiously, these actors were often established at various levels in other fields prior to their appearances in the genre, such as modelling (Richard Roundtree), American football (Jim Brown, Fred Williamson) and comedy (Rudy Ray Moore). The racial binary oppositions in these films relates strongly to the Black Power movement because, as Guerrero argues, “these films were made possible by the rising political and social consciousness of black people, which translated into a large black audience thirsting to see their full humanity depicted on the commercial cinema screen” (1993, 69). This political consciousness was left satisfied by these films due to the literal and metaphorical victories of the black heroes, which Tom Symmons calls “violent triumphs over oppressive white power structures” (2016, 58).

Blaxploitation was not a simple matter of victory, either for African American images onscreen or for the people behind the camera. Indeed, there were several industrial issues which marred its success. The cycle emerged during a period of difficulty for Hollywood, and according to Peter Krämer and Yannis Tzioumakis, “between 1969 and 1971 five of the seven major studios made a loss in at least one year, if not across the period as a whole” (2018, xiv). Following this period of great difficulty, what has since been perceived as a Hollywood ‘renaissance’ emerged, whereupon a generation of young white auteurs, some with a counter-cultural instinct, found themselves helming major studio projects (Cook, 2000, 133). While this renaissance occasionally championed countercultural interests, it was predominantly white. Krämer and Tzioumakis claim that the Hollywood renaissance consisted of films made by, and about, white men (2018, xix), perhaps exemplified by the films *Easy Rider* (Hopper, 1969) and *Midnight Cowboy* (Schlesinger, 1969). Both films were box office successes, the

latter winning the Best Picture and Director Academy Awards. *Easy Rider* is about hippie-bikers who escape from the urban environment to find freedom in a cross-country trip, disillusioned with contemporary capitalist society and using the trip as a journey away from 'normality'. On the other hand, *Midnight Cowboy* explores sexual taboos (including homosexuality and rape) with formal experimentation, subverting conventional modes of storytelling to include dizzying montages which convey the protagonist's scattered memories of when he was seemingly sexually assaulted (See Fig. 11). Countercultural films were not necessarily the dominant trend in the New Hollywood, (arguably ceasing to remain countercultural if they are financially successful and welcomed into mainstream culture) and not all New Hollywood auteurs were making films founded in anti-establishment sentiments. For example, *Boxcar Bertha* (1972), an early directorial effort from Martin Scorsese, is more of an exploitation crime film than one focused on a countercultural dialogue.

Blaxploitation filmmakers were only at the fringes of the major studios, and it remained a largely independent phenomenon. Verney states that they were typically low-cost productions (2003, 83) and white filmmakers sought to take advantage of the market, often resulting in crude attempts by white directors and producers to appeal to black audiences (ibid., 84). This tendency is exemplified in Pam Grier's final two films in her multi-picture contract with American International Pictures, *Friday Foster* (Marks, 1975) and *Sheba, Baby* (Girdler, 1975). Both films arrived late in the cycle and appeared to be lazily recycling vigilante storylines which Grier was known for at that time. According to Mia Mask, *Sheba, Baby* indicated "generic exhaustion" in every respect (2009, 98), and the films soon ceased to appeal to the breadth of African-American audiences, appealing instead, according to Robert Sklar, to "a segment of a segment: young urban males" (1994, 331). This crude appeal was heavily criticised. In his position of power among African-Americans, Junius Griffin, the president of the Beverly Hills-Hollywood branch of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People), denounced the films as "another form of cultural genocide" (Variety, 1972, 2).

By the mid-1980s, Eddie Murphy was a leading African-American star, yet Krin Gabbard has suggested that he is "radically removed from black culture" (2010, 130). Therefore, despite (or,

perhaps, because of) his comedic persona in these roles, it did not create the same cause for concern as the Blaxploitation cycle. Gabbard claims that Murphy did not trigger the anxieties of white America due to his lack of identification with black communities, his role as a policeman in *Beverly Hills Cop* (Brest, 1984) binding him to the law (2010, 132). Deviating from the Blaxploitation anti-heroes who fought symbols of white oppression, Murphy is assimilated in these law-enforcement roles, offset by white policemen in *Beverly Hills Cop* and *48 Hrs.* (Hill, 1982). The pairing of Nick Nolte and Murphy in *48 Hrs.* fits within a larger Hollywood trend of the 'buddy movie', and bi-racial incarnations became particularly popular, as in *Lethal Weapon* (Donner, 1987), *Die Hard* (McTiernan, 1988), and *Rush Hour* (Ratner, 1998). All of these spawned several sequels, and Murphy's persona would continue to be counteracted by white male authority figures in several similar bi-racial buddy movies, including *Showtime* (Dey, 2002) and *I Spy* (Thomas, 2002) (See Fig. 12). Alongside Murphy's box office popularity, sporadic awards success came for African-American performers too. In 1991, Whoopi Goldberg became the first black woman in over fifty years to win the Best Supporting Actress Academy Award for *Ghost* (Zucker, 1990), while between 1980 and 2000, the Best Supporting Actor Academy Award went to Louis Gossett Jr., Denzel Washington and Cuba Gooding Jr, all for films very different to the hood cycle, such as romance, war and comedy.

1990s Unrest and Cultural Expression

The socio-political climate of race relations in 1990s America is part-defined through anxieties around the cultural roles of young black urban males. Guerrero suggests that newscasts made the sharpening climate of deteriorating race relations and racial conflict "depressingly tangible" (1993, 161), something attributable to poverty and the epidemic of crack cocaine. Verney argues "in inner-city ghettos rising levels of drug dependency and violent crime added to the problems created by deteriorating social infrastructures" (2003, 88). Verney presents a damning picture of the effect of drug dependency on young African-American males, attributing the key disparities to an unequal social infrastructure. He comments that "in the 1990s a third of African American families lived in poverty compared to only 10 percent of white households" (ibid., 87), citing several causal factors

exacerbated by the financial recession founded primarily in the economic policies of the presidencies of Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush (ibid.). According to Verney, the latter Republican administrations did nothing to soften the recession caused by Carter's presidency, often characterising African-Americans as 'welfare spongers' or 'violent criminals', while reports of clashes between African-Americans and police became commonplace (ibid., 88). Thus, economic impoverishment and institutional racism has remained socially entrenched (Martin, 1993, 36), while statistics for drug-related incarceration reveal that by 1999, "[African-Americans] made up 14 percent of all drug users but 35 percent of arrests on drug offences, over half the total number of convictions and three-quarters of prison admissions" (Harrison, 2010, 22).

This racial tension bubbled to the surface on April 29, 1992, when the police officers who assaulted Rodney King were acquitted (**See Fig. 13**). Guerrero claims that this brutal, globally televised spectacle left no doubt that America was still a racist society, revealing a white America persistently attempting to preserve its status in the racial hierarchy (1993, 161). This brought forth a need for African-Americans to confront the festering racial tensions which had been ignored in the previous decade (Bogle, 2001, 325), sparking the civil disobedience, rioting, and looting in Los Angeles in 1992. This resulted in a suggested total of fifty-one people killed and over one billion dollars' worth of property destroyed (Herman, 2005, 115) (**See Fig. 14**). Martin reinforces how African-Americans were criminalised by the news, arguing that "news photos of persons arrested during the Los Angeles riots were sadly and maddeningly evocative of slavery" (1993, 27). Manufactured news media connections between African-Americans and criminality persisted amid the racial turmoil (**See Fig. 15**). Martin suggests that these events were part of a 'spiral' which shall remain unaltered unless there is long-term change in the political and economic power of the African-American community (ibid., 35). The issue of race is not coincidental, and the riots forced the media to confront the inequality between white and African-Americans. According to Harrison, "race became an object of fascination", allowing for media reflections upon police brutality, the root causes of poverty and violence in inner cities (2010, 22). In contrast to Harrison's observation that violence within black communities is usually perceived as explainable through habit rather than "more complex social

factors” (ibid.), these events fostered consideration of multiple social issues. Despite the globally circulated footage of King’s arrest and the acquittal of the officers involved, the riots did not alter the ‘spiral’, although it created room and inclination for the normally voyeuristic white audience to consider deeper socio-political issues affecting African-Americans.

Despite this racial tension, black popular culture was thriving during this period. As Watkins claims, where media industries once excluded African-Americans, the growth of black youth culture necessitated “new commercial tactics” (2002, 239) through a “widespread appropriation” of black expressive cultures in the late 1980s, all projected through its mainstream commodification in the dorm rooms and suburban homes of white youth (ibid.). While popular and integrated into white spaces, this developing black youth culture was not ignorant of the socio-political climate. Guerrero argues that rage was an energising element in many pop-cultural criticisms of white racism, with black nationalist sentiments expressed in the rap lyrics of Public Enemy and N.W.A, as well as the films of Bill Duke and Spike Lee (1993, 159) (See Fig. 16). The popular acceptance of rap music during this period is unsurprising for several reasons. As Boyd claims, “rap is the perfect continuation of an oral tradition, but in a way specific to contemporary society” (1997, 35). Indeed, this was not a new phenomenon, but drew from a rich history of African-American folk culture such as the musical tradition commonly referred to as ‘the blues’. Lower-class African-Americans are especially empowered by this genre, and Boyd argues that “[rap] is one of the few avenues for the articulation of lower-class black male angst relative to the post-industrial environment” (ibid.). Black popular culture thus enfranchised lower-class African-Americans, providing them with an outlet to express their own angst and frustrations within a white dominated society. However, this was tied to the commercial necessity that minority presences often flourish because mainstream representation requires more and more images to fill the expanding spaces available (ibid., 5). In turn, the economic and cultural ambitions of the film and music industries necessitate both the identification and eventual commodification of trend shifts in youth culture (Watkins, 2002, 240). Despite the controversies generated by rap, especially gangsta rap (Verney, 2003, 98), Boyd argues that “the more excessive the African American image, the stronger the likelihood that it will be accepted”

(1997, 5). Boyd's position asserts the genre's sustainability in the face of vilification, linking to the earlier notion of some white viewers as media voyeurs of ghetto warfare. The music of black angst and anger offered another perspective on the same unrest which titillated suburban viewers.

Amidst this popular cultural backdrop, several African-American filmmakers worked successfully in the 1990s. This contrasted with significant exclusion previously (Antonio, 2002, 1), and several of the hood films were moderate box office successes in the early 1990s, earning money for both major and independent film distributors (Watkins, 2002, 236). These included *New Jack City* (Van Peebles, 1991), which earned almost \$50 million from a \$6 million production budget, and *Menace II Society* (Hughes and Hughes, 1993), which earned almost \$30 million from a budget of \$3 million (Watkins, 1998, 190-193). Released at opposite ends of the cycle's popularity, *New Jack City* is a major studio production (Warner Bros. Pictures) compared to *Menace II Society*, which was distributed by the then-independent distributor, New Line Cinema. As Watkins claims, "the emergence of the ghetto action cycle illustrates the degree to which production trends in Hollywood are shaped by social and political as well as industrial and economic factors" (2002, 237). The success of these films can therefore be read partly as a result of inner cities being prominent in the public consciousness and the growth in popularity of black cultural expression. Incorporation of socio-political factors links to the notion that "popular films are geared for audience understanding and in this sense they must be reflections of what can be understood by people of the era in which the film was produced" (Nestey, 1982, 3). *Juice* illustrates this through its depiction of fractious relations between the central group of young black men and the police. When the police question the group individually, they ask the protagonist, Q (Omar Epps), why he is nervous. Q responds, "We're three niggers in a police station. It doesn't matter what happened. If y'all want us to be guilty, we'll be guilty" (See Fig. 17). While generally referring to discomfort faced by African-Americans when confronted by law representatives, there were criminal cases around this period which relate to Q's anxiety, such as the Central Park jogger case. In 1989, nine persons were attacked in Central Park, including a sexual assault. Over the next two years, several young men of colour were arrested, including the 'Central Park Five', five young men of colour who, despite no matching DNA evidence, were imprisoned

regarding the sexual assault. The conviction was based upon their police confessions, which they claimed were coerced. The Five were later exonerated in 2002, affirming this coercion, and highlighting the issue Q mentions.

Despite tackling these issues, it is important to evaluate the extent to which stereotypes still persist in these films. David J. Leonard has been critical of the sub-genre, arguing that “the cinematic representations of blackness continue to perpetuate inequality, poverty, and state violence” (2006, 2-3). Economically, the sub-genre was favoured by studio executives because the production cost-to-profit ratio exceeded a successful return on investment, not least because they tapped into these youth cultures. The notion of ‘crossover’ is important to executives motivated by profit margins, and according to Jesse A. Rhines, this “refers to the potential of a film addressing non-white Americans’ concerns to secure a significant financial return from white American viewers...because whites control film financing” (1996, 70). Watkins sees a distinct crossover reach due to the appropriation of the language, style and sensibilities of hip-hop culture (2002, 240). Similarly, Antonio argues that Hollywood’s economic imperative is tied to the longevity of films made by African-Americans (2002, 11). Broader economic shifts occurred during this period, enabling this effective crossover, and Harrison identifies the conglomeration of entertainment industries which transformed cinema in the 1990s. This often became visible in the films themselves, resulting in a ‘disrupted textuality’ (2010, 110 and 112). In *Juice* this is characterised (like in many hood films) by the integral role of hip-hop, from its narrative formation and distinctly urban mise-en-scène, to its casting choices and the ubiquity of particular musical accompaniments on their soundtracks. According to Robert Gregg, “the idea of ‘escaping the ghetto’ has been a powerful one” (2000, 330), and *Juice* depicts Q’s attempts to become a DJ while drawn simultaneously into his friends’ criminal lifestyle, sullyng his music industry aspirations. The theme song by Eric B. & Rakim is even mixed by one of Q’s competitors in the competition, and the cast features several prominent hip-hop figures of the time, including Tupac Shakur and Queen Latifah. Latifah’s role is worthy of note as she manages the DJ competition, judging those worthy of entering. This defines her appearance as self-referential, portraying a gate-keeper for the world of hip-hop (**See Fig. 18**). Each ensuing case-study evinces this ‘disrupted

textuality', making them worthy of analysis not only as genre texts, but as films which illustrate a whole range of industrial considerations.

Genre Roots

While this music industry connection relates to the correlation between Blaxploitation's success and its popular soundtracks, certain conventions of the Blaxploitation cycle in relation to hood films should be noted. Moreover, the general thrust of the gangster film since the 1930s is equally important. Robert Warshow's much-cited 1948 essay *The Gangster as Tragic Hero* focused on the formula of the 1930s model, suggesting that "the gangster genre has always been a complete presentation of the modern sense of tragedy" (2001, 99), and that it was structurally founded upon the rise and fall of its gangster anti-heroes. It is worth noting that this is a classical narrative structure incorporated by Warshow to the gangster genre and, as Jack Shadoian claims, despite existing long before the genre, the structure's transposition into the historical present with this genre captivated audiences (2003, 33). This structure is observed in *Little Caesar* (LeRoy, 1931) (**See Fig. 19**), where Enrico 'Rico' Bandello (Edward G. Robinson) rises through the ranks of Chicago's crime scene, reaching the top briefly before dying in a gunfight with police. According to Jonathan Munby, *Little Caesar*, *Public Enemy* (Wellman, 1931) and *Scarface* (Hawks and Rosson, 1932) are the key examples of the classic American gangster film (1999, 39), each adhering to the rise and fall narrative emblematic of this period. This 'rise and fall' is related to the gangster's identity itself, Warshow asserting that "the gangster's whole life is an effort to assert himself as an individual...he always dies *because he is an individual*", his death making him a failure (2001, 103).

Like the later hood films, the gangster films of this era were constructed expressions of the social turmoil of the time related to alcohol bootlegging and the Great Depression. As Baker suggests, "it was no coincidence that the first all-talkie, *Lights of New York* (Foy, 1928), was about bootlegging" (2007, 27) with Munby arguing that "the ethnic gangster's struggles with economic and cultural disenfranchisement resonated with a growing *national* condition" (1999, 43). Elaborating this point,

Shadoian remarks that these gangsters relieved the pain of the depression (2003, 29). Like the socio-political climate which is so vital for analysing the hood films, the gangster films of the 1930s were similarly inflected by burgeoning societal issues. However, officially appointed censors had an issue with these disenfranchised anti-heroes. According to Colin McArthur, many gangster films of the period defined the gangster as the hero, rendering the genre a “major battleground in the growing pressure for censorship of the movies” (1972, 38). McArthur recognises two ways which censorship impacted the gangster genre at the time. Firstly, through “denunciatory prologues against the gangster”, then through a second phase of gangster films (such as *G-Men* (Keighley, 1935)) which had iconographic similarities to earlier gangster films, but which foregrounded government agents as the protagonist (1972, 38). Therefore, the gangster genre responded to these criticisms by either disapproval of the gangster’s criminality or by making a new wave of films which focused on authority figures instead of gangsters (**See Fig. 20**).

This transition and ‘indistinguishable iconography’ between Cagney playing a gangster (*The Public Enemy*) and an authority figure (*G-Men*) relates to the malleability of genre. Watkins suggests that “in a cultural milieu marked by pastiche, ambiguity and boundary-crossing, genre lines are often blurred, disrupted and/or recombined” (2002, 243), and despite the differences between the setting of 1930s gangster films and the hood sub-genre, there are various comparisons to be drawn. Neale’s point that the gangster film is marked by an array of cycles and trends (2002, 34) supports the notion of blurred genre lines, while Watkins highlights how the film industry fostered the sub-genre. Like Blaxploitation and the social problem films, he argues that “the ghetto action film cycle was both timely and sensational” (2002, 238), and that “the currents of social change that nourished the [hood film] cycle also represented the industry’s ongoing effort to remain relevant to young consumers and trendsetters” (ibid.). This industry appeal to profitable demographics is not unusual for African-American filmmaking, developing in the same vein as the earlier social problem films and Blaxploitation, where growing racial consciousness caused the industry to foster these two different waves. Watkins believes that the sub-genre “represented the film industry’s efforts to manage, once again, shifts in the cultural and political landscape” (ibid.). Like Blaxploitation films, the sub-genre

was a low-risk venture partly due to low production costs, as with the modestly budgeted *New Jack City* and *Menace II Society*. Such an approach to financial sustainability was crucial to both the survival and development of films directed by African-Americans, but also to trends co-opted by white filmmakers surrounding racial themes.

Sklar directly compares the hood films to gangster films of the 1930s through the violent agency of the leading characters. He states, “the violence and sexism of black male youths in these films, were indeed as vivid and controversial as similar behaviour [by 1930s gangsters]” (1994, 349). Sklar’s claims that hood films capitalised not only upon historically vilified representations of ethnicity, but also character conventions established by the 1930s films. This is exemplified in *Juice*, wherein Bishop (Tupac Shakur) idolises Cody Jarrett, James Cagney’s gangster figure in *White Heat* (Walsh, 1949). Bishop mouths Cody’s triumphant last words as the latter accelerates his demise by setting off an explosive, marvelling at Cody’s bravado (**See Fig. 21**), and linking his suicide to a search for control. He comments “If you’ve got to go out, that’s how you go out. That motherfucker took his destiny in his own hands”. Bishop seeks similar control in his own life, something accommodated by his revolver. For Bishop, the gun symbolises ‘juice’: power and respect, never relinquishing it once he receives it, and even killing his friend who tries to take it (and thus its symbolic significance) from him. This symbolism has a wider allegorical purpose, depicting the allure of crime for young, inner-city, black men but which results inevitably in a bleak spiral. Bishop’s death in the film is less of a spectacle than Cody’s, begging Q to save him as he dangles from a rooftop. This reveals how *Juice* grounds the archetypes of the early gangster films within a new social reality, the death of the gangster being almost pathetic here. The ending freezes on Q, still alive as he rejects Bishop’s creed and solemnly shaking his head when a bystander says *he* now has the juice.

Such moments address some criticisms levied against the sub-genre, such as Watkins’ argument that “[hood] films were premised on a production strategy designed to serve an audience already titillated with and primed for action-oriented narratives about the deterioration of America’s inner cities” (2002, 238). Bishop’s hyper-masculine traits of aggression and volatility are quashed by the

end, Q refuses to follow Bishop's creed. While Sklar argues that these characters are fulfilling genre tradition, Watkins argues that their behaviour appeals to the same suburban voyeurs salivating over news stories of inner city violence. The following chapters will identify and debate these issues directly, using specific films to explore the relationship between the hood films, genre and Hollywood.

Chapter Two: “We ain’t nothing but hood rats”: *Set It Off*

Girlz N the Hood

The hood sub-genre has been established as a predominantly masculine one, therefore making *Set It Off*, on the surface at least, a substantial departure from the typical, male-centred hood film.

Characterisations of women were often reliant upon degrading, negative stereotypes. *Boyz N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991) can be taken as an emblematic example of the sub-genre, and Guerrero argues that its reception points to the successes and potentialities of the hood film (1993, 182). Its representation of mothers and fathers establishes certain templates for the typical hood film, as seen in a subsequent example such as *Fresh* (Yakin, 1994). There are two significant depictions of mothers in *Boyz N the Hood*. Firstly, Reva Styles (Angela Bassett), the mother of the main character, Tre Styles (Desi Arnez Hines II and Cuba Gooding Jr.), cannot cope with her son’s disciplinary problems and believes it would be best if Tre lived with his father instead of her. When she approaches the father, Furious Styles (Laurence Fishburne), she tells him, “I can’t teach him how to be a man. That’s your job”. In the masculine environment of the hood, Reva believes that Tre needs his father to grow up properly, and that only Furious can teach him how to be a ‘man’. The explicit assertion is that she could not possibly replace him, but he can replace her. This adheres to Michele Wallace’s suggestion that the film makes the ideological suggestion that that boys who do not have fathers fail, while boys who have fathers succeed (2004, 216).

This is represented differently with the second significant mother in the film, Sheryl (Ceal). Sheryl is depicted as an irresponsible mother, addicted to crack cocaine and neglectful of her baby. Sheryl is introduced in the film after Tre sees her baby daughter in the middle of the street and saves her from an oncoming car. When Tre knocks at Sheryl’s door to return her daughter and warn her about this happening again, she is seen as unkempt and indifferent (**See Fig. 22**). When Tre warns her about this, she changes the subject to satisfying her addiction at any cost, exclaiming “you got some rock? I’ll suck your dick!”. Tre ignores this and tells her to change the baby’s diaper because she “almost smell[s] as bad as you”. Like the situation with Reva, this scene demonstrates a constructed need for

a responsible father figure in the life of a young child, now regardless of its gender. One mother cannot cope with her child's unruly nature and needs the father to set him straight, whereas this other mother ignores her child due to her addiction and, consciously or otherwise, relies on the men in the neighbourhood to look after it when she cannot. Both instances illustrate symptoms of patriarchal control, as Tre is already beyond maternal correction and Sheryl is an addict reliant upon the trade controlled by the criminal patriarchy and is prepared to degrade herself sexually to feed the cravings she has developed. This brief analysis of how *Boyz* handles two of its mother characters is emblematic of a generally negative representation of women in hood films. This example seems to affirm Massood's claim that hood films "offer male stories at the expense of complex female characters" (2012, 236). The film deals with Tre's tumultuous journey to manhood, along with the tragic lives of his two close friends, Doughboy (Ice Cube) and Ricky Baker (Morris Chestnut), who become victims of cyclic gangland violence. It does not sympathetically deal with the lives of women in the hood, who mainly exist to elevate paternal figures like Furious or perpetuate regressive stereotypes. Indeed, the film's title makes its gendered focus absolutely clear. Bogle observes how common this representation is in hood films by stating that "women were rarely developed characters, sometimes treated like little more than disposable items" (2001, 347).

Therefore, *Set It Off*, a film which follows four desperate inner-city African-American women who turn to robbing banks, seems out of place for the sub-genre. However, as with the typically phallogentric hood films, Blaxploitation can be seen to be something of a precursor. Blaxploitation films, while usually sexually subjugating women (Verney, 2003, 83), featured several heroines throughout the cycle, most successfully in the title roles played by Pam Grier (**See Fig. 23**). Mask explains that Grier's screen persona (seen in films like *Foxy Brown* (Hill, 1974) and *Coffy* (Hill, 1973)) combined brazen sexuality and physical strength to encapsulate the ethos of personal frustration, sexual liberation and political upheaval which permeated American society (2009, 60-61). In *Coffy*, Grier plays the eponymous nurse who terrorises the inner-city drug dealers she deems responsible for her sister's death. Using *Super Fly* (Parks Jr., 1972) as an example of how women are often featured in Blaxploitation, the leading anti-hero's love interest seems important to him, but her

longest appearance in the film is an explicit sex scene. Perhaps typically for these films, the film's anti-hero is also seen having sex with a different woman at the beginning of the film (**See Fig. 24**). In *Coffy*, instead of adhering to the sexualised and subservient stereotype seen in films like *Super Fly*, she is an active agent in a story about her own vigilante justice. Indeed, her entire narrative trajectory is founded upon a violent form of justice not unlike the kind employed by her male counterparts, such as the titular ex-Green Beret, *Slaughter* (Starrett, 1972).

There were other blaxploitation heroines like *Cleopatra Jones* (Starrett, 1973) who marked a deviation from the characters played by Grier. Jones is a glamorous super-agent akin to James Bond, redefining racial and gender roles by occupying a role (CIA operative) usually reserved for white men (Sims, 2006, 93-96). Her profession and lifestyle are therefore recognisably a departure from Grier's *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*. The differences are also found in how the women use their sexuality. While Grier weaponised her sexuality, Tamara Dobson (the actress playing Jones) felt nudity was unwarranted and clearly sought to differentiate Jones from the other heroines; she flaunts her sexuality but does not rely on it (Sims, 2006, 94-96). Jones shares *Coffy*'s mission to disrupt the drug trade, but while *Coffy* operates locally, Jones works on a more global scale, seen at the beginning overseeing the destruction of an opium poppy field in Turkey (**See Fig. 25**). Sims suggests the reason for Jones' globetrotting is to demonstrate that the drug trade is "a product of a global capitalist system beyond the control of average working African-Americans" (2006, 98). Jones' globetrotting antics were not common in blaxploitation films, and like the majority of blaxploitation and hood films, the women of *Set It Off* are confined to urban areas.

Why the women choose to *Set It Off*

Set It Off therefore fits into the hood film mould in a similar way to how films featuring Grier fitted into Blaxploitation. While *Boyz* is regressive in its depiction of mothers, it is ideologically charged in its depiction of what Mason describes as "the endless and self-destructive cycle of violence created by institutionalised racism, lack of opportunity, drug use and the hostile warlike attitude of the Los Angeles police" (2002, 154). While articulating Tre's journey into manhood, the film critiques

prominent issues facing African-Americans at the time, including racism on both an inter-personal and institutional level. *Set It Off* is not dissimilar in the sense that because it is about urban African-American women, it functions as a complex and layered exploration into the socio-economic issues affecting their real life analogues at the time. The motivations for the women engaging in crime are significant, especially in how they relate to the realities of economic experiences. The four women, Stony (Jada Pinkett), Cleo (Queen Latifah), Frankie and Tisean, work as janitors and each are victims of various forms of inequality which lead them to band together as outlaws. For instance, Frankie's story will be explored later in the chapter as she is a bank teller at the beginning of the film, but after being persecuted and fired by her employers for being deemed guilty by association with robbers, she becomes a cleaner alongside the other women. These women's participation in the workforce is not uncommon during this period, as 5.3 million black women over the age of sixteen worked for wages in America, yet one out of three black households was below the poverty line (Jones, 1995, 324). Jones continues by explaining the potential reasons for this statistic, including the lack of benefits and job security of blue-collar work and how (typically) black women's salaries were less than white men, white women and black men (1995, 324).

Money is established as a prominent issue for each woman, especially Stony and Tisean. In the case of Tisean, she is a single mother of a young child, unable to properly support her baby due to her salary. After her boss, Luther (Thom Byrd), refuses to honour their earlier agreement to have her salary paid in cash (to avoid taxation), Tisean brings her child to work as she cannot afford a babysitter. This leads the child to poison himself, so the women take him to hospital. There, a Child Protective Services representative ignores Tisean's circumstances and proceeds to put her child into custody, explaining that she needs to prove she can pay for proper child care or a judge will decide what will happen to the child. This issue is foreshadowed when the women are introduced in the opening, as Tisean has brought her baby to an evening party (**See Fig. 26**). This series of events provides Tisean with her motivation to become a criminal. This already creates a distinction between the representation of drug addicted single mother Sheryl in *Boyz*. Here, the film provides time and sufficient context for what has led Tisean to be accused of neglect by a seemingly well-intentioned

organisation. Sheryl is demonised for her addiction and is not shown as anything other than pathetic, whereas Tisean is a sympathetic character, a mother who wants the best for her son but cannot provide it.

Jones states that “female-headed households constituted 75 percent of all poor black families. More than 50 percent of all black female-headed households were poor” (1995, 324). This shows that Tisean’s case is not an isolated one, her struggle is evidently familiar and becomes particularly pertinent when her child injures himself. Regarding welfare opportunities, they could perhaps not be mentioned in the film due to a discriminatory distribution of support. A survey found that “young black women were more likely to be held responsible for their plight and much less worthy of government support than single white welfare mothers” (cited in Reese, 2005, 180). Tisean’s race is therefore a significant aspect in her strife, a societal inequality in terms of salary and welfare support left her with no choice but to put her child in a dangerous situation.

Economic issues are also a core issue for the main character, Stony. She is the head of her household, taking care of her younger brother, Stevie (Chaz Lamar Shepard). Like many other female-headed black households, they struggle for money. Stony however has an ambition to send Stevie to UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) so that he can escape the hood. Even though she “can barely pay the bills”, she is eager to make sure he can attend college, a plot-line that is an escape narrative. For fear of Stevie resorting to a life of crime before an untimely death, she sees UCLA as a chance for him to leave their neighbourhood behind, thus indicating a geographical fear of inner-city existence and what it entails. Stony’s belief is recognised in Monica W. Ndounou’s claim that these escape narratives provide “ongoing solutions to black Americans’ challenges in American society” (2014, 214). To try and secure this escape for her brother, she proves that she is willing to do whatever it takes. While socialising with the other women, she sees Nate Andrews (Charlie Robinson), a sleazy car salesman who once offered Stony a job. When Tisean asks her if he wanted Stony to work for him, Stony replies, “that’s not all he wanted”, alluding to unwanted sexual advances. This form of harassment reflects the film’s adherence to certain real truths, as these circumstances were not

uncommon. Carolyn M. West comments that “approximately one-third of Black women in a Los Angeles sample had been sexually harassed at work. In most cases, harassers made sexual propositions or offered job promotions in exchange for sexual favours” (Wyatt and Riederle, 1995, cited in West, 2013, 31). This form of harassment was pervasive for black women in Los Angeles at the time. Nate’s behaviour has not changed since and Stony finds herself in a desperate situation. Stony requires an advance of \$2,000 from Nate to go towards Stevie’s UCLA fund. Nate replies, “you got to give me a reason to do that. You know what I mean?”. To get an advance on her potential paycheck, Stony must succumb to the kind of harassment that she was once able to resist, but now her financial situation leaves her with little choice. Stony is conflicted by Nate’s proposal to which Nate is apathetic. His prior exterior friendliness and warmth is replaced by a cold demeanour (**See Fig. 27**), revealing him as predatory, using his power and wealth to get what, and who, he wants. When Stony succumbs to his proposition, the following scene is a cold, unromantic one (**See Fig. 28**). The sex scene is shown from the perspective of Stony, she looks away from Nate, biting her lip and holding back tears. Stony’s immediate shower when she returns home arguably serves to scrub away the physical and metaphorical uncleanliness that she feels after the encounter. When she leaves Nate’s house, her mood is reflected by the cold *mise-en-scène*. The shot is coloured blue and grey, depicting Stony walking down the road ahead of an overbearing factory landscape (**See Fig. 29**), highlighting the looming presence that the industrial sector has on this impoverished area. The presence of the industrial sector is explored later in the film when the women relax on a rooftop. Cleo points out a nearby factory and says, “they was paying folks \$15 an hour at that place...For \$15 an hour, I’d be all, “Fuck, I’m right here. What I got to do, sir ass motherfucker?” They’d have to pull me off that damn machine!”. Cleo’s sentiment here reflects the kinds of economic issues which black women faced during this period. Jones’ work is once more useful in understanding the reality in the situation of these women. She states that poor people tended to be concentrated in poor communities, such as South Central Los Angeles, lacking access to good jobs at decent wages (1995, 327). Cleo’s enthusiasm seems to be true to the dearth in quality job opportunities for impoverished areas. Her situation means she would be willing to sacrifice her tough personality to adopt a slave-like persona

to work for \$15 an hour at a factory. Her commitment to this work is just a fantasy as this opportunity no longer exists for these women, their desperation for financially rewarding and secure employment remaining largely imaginary.

Stony's encounter with Nate ends up meaning little when she brings the money to Stevie. When she enters with the cheque, Stevie is lounging on the sofa, watching television and talking to a friend on the phone, reminding his friend to leave the champagne unopened until he arrives (**See Fig. 30**). This scene is a defining moment for both Stony and Stevie. Stevie admits that he did not get accepted into UCLA, meaning Stony's efforts have been in vain. Stony angrily asks him "do you have any idea what I had to go through?" to which he dismissively responds "I'm not staying around for this". It is not simply that Stony's efforts have been wasted, they are also ignored by Stevie. He does not understand the sacrifices she has made to try and give him a better life, and he does not care to know, sitting idle on the sofa. After the years of being encouraged by Stony to attend college, he says "maybe that life is just not for me", and this admission is a defining moment in Stevie's life. Instead of accepting the help and advice of Stony to escape the ghetto and try to make a better life for himself, Stevie has decided that the hood is where he belongs. This choice is also what seals his fate. Unlike how hood films like *Boyz* depict its maternal characters, Stony actively tries hard and makes sacrifices for the sake of the male in her family. She wants what she believes is best for her brother, seeing the mindless, cyclic violence in the hood, knowing that Stevie would somehow be drawn into it. When Stevie makes his choice, Stony rips up the cheque and holds her head in her hands.

The friend that Stevie goes to see is revealed to be the remaining bank robber seen in the robbery at the start of the film. His signature 'AP' shaving on the back of his head allowed the police to close in on him. Stevie likes the AP so he gets it shaved into his head. With the police waiting outside, using the AP to identify the suspect, they apprehend Stevie and kill him, mistakenly believing he was drawing a gun. This scene places the police firmly in contempt, alluding to the excessive force seen in the Rodney King case. In highlighting the abundance of such events, Harrison claims that "outrageously high levels of incarceration amongst young black men and recurrent reports of police

violence...further attested to the dire situation for African-Americans" (2010, 22). This scene can also be related back to the earlier contextualising of how black people have been demonised in the media. According to Francesca Royster, "not only does the film reveal the range of guilt by association, but it also posits that black filmic images are read wrongly and out of context and are used to confirm already arrived at notions about black criminality" (2003, 185). The police do not take time to check if Stevie is the perpetrator they are looking for, they diagnose his guilt because of his colour, the haircut and where he is. As discussed in Chapter One, this racial profiling fits within the setting of 1990s Los Angeles after the racial conflict which ensued around the time of the assault on Rodney King. Left without Stevie, Stony is broken and has no purpose. She embraces the robbery idea when Frankie says "we just taking away from the system that's fucking us all anyway". Frankie's statement here reflects the same kind of bitter sentiment embodied by the 1992 riots in Los Angeles. The group are tired of being exploited and discriminated against by 'the system', one which subjects them to police brutality, unequal child support, low-paying jobs, misogyny, and guilt by association. The notion of guilt by association is also fundamental to Frankie's story. At the beginning of the film, she is working as a teller at a bank which is robbed by someone who grew up in her neighbourhood. Despite being the victim in this situation, and an employee of two years, she is accused by her bosses and the police of colluding with the robbers. Her boss does not believe her innocence and decides to fire her, refusing to give her a recommendation. Frankie's experience resonates with Catalyst's research findings that "women of colour often characterise the barriers they encounter as comprising a 'concrete ceiling' – one that is dense and less easily shattered", and that these barriers include stereotypes, scrutiny, questioning of authority and credibility (2004, 3). Frankie's situation is reflective of this 'concrete ceiling' as she is a seemingly trusted employee (signified by her recall that she counted \$250,000 by hand the day prior). However, this is undone through the challenge to her credibility by both the police and her employers. While constructed in accordance with certain realities faced by black women, this situation also expresses a cynical view of the American dream. Mark R. Rank et al. explains that the American dream is a concept embedded in America's culture and society. It is about reaching one's full potential by being able to pursue and develop one's

interests and talents (2014, 16-17) alongside economic security and well-being, all of which consists of having the resources to live a comfortable life (ibid., 63). Frankie's dismissal suggests a distinct flaw in this concept, her perceived stability and comfort undermined because of her race. The mere assumption that she is in collusion with the robbers is racially inflected, based as it is upon the whiteness of the figures of authority and the concurrent racial profiling exhibited by the police against Stevie. The fallibility of the American dream is implicit in Jennifer D. Brody's claim that "for these black women, to reverse the dictum, it's where you are from, not where you are going" (2005, 370). While it is supposed to inspire hope that a successful future is attainable for all American citizens, the economic and social realities of contemporary inner-cities dictates that the American dream is not feasible. The film's apparent rejection of the concept relates to a wider genre convention that gangster films are far less trusting of the promises of the American dream than other genres (Anderson, 1996, 143).

Set It Off and genre

The film frequently engages with the gangster genre in an explicitly intertextual fashion. This is present from the outset when the women are introduced attending Stony's 1970s-themed party (**See Fig. 26**). Cleo and Tisean's afro wigs recall the blaxploitation heroines like Grier (**See Fig. 23**) who inspired the film, also signified by Cleo's name being short for Cleopatra, potentially referencing the heroine Cleopatra Jones. The cynicism of the American dream is also visible in a potential allusion to the 'World Is Yours' motif from *Scarface* (Hawks and Rosson, 1932 and De Palma, 1983). In both *Scarface* films, the anti-hero, Tony (Paul Muni and Al Pacino), sees an electric sign of the words 'The World Is Yours', believing that it refers to his own criminal capitalist aspirations (**See Fig. 31**). The sign symbolises the fallibility of the American dream, as Tony is seduced by its message, ascending to the top of the local criminal underworld only for his reign to be cut short in line with the tragic hero structure as outlined by Warshaw (2001). With De Palma's film as the more immediate reference point, Chapter One referred to the film's placement within the then-recurrent trend of immigrant criminals. Chapter Three also engages with the film's place within the sub-genre from how it is referenced in *Paid in Full*. During the climactic failed robbery in *Set It Off*, Cleo shoots at a glass

mosaic globe, shattering it (See Fig. 32). This resonates with the draw of the American dream seen in 1930s gangster films like *Scarface*, these women fully aware that the dream is not real for them. A more explicit reference to the gangster genre appears when the film parodies *The Godfather* (See Fig. 33). In this scene, the women gather around the roundtable of an apartment they are cleaning, mimic thick Italian-American accents, refer to themselves as ‘Dons’, and discuss managing the money from the next robbery. In such an explicit reference to a gangster film about the Italian-American Mafia, *Set It Off* creates a contrast between these characters compared to previous genre archetypes, drawing on popular culture’s imagination of stereotypical criminality. As discussed in Chapter One, Italian-Americans were often the leading cinematic immigrant criminals; therefore, this intertextual reference becomes partially problematic as it adheres to stereotypes of other ethnic groups. The women’s exaggerated performance brings attention to both their position as low-level criminals rather than in the kind of organised network seen in *The Godfather*, and also to their identities as women operating in a typically masculine space. Their societal position is also indicated by their work uniforms and how their discussion takes place in the apartment of one of their wealthy clients, contrasting the high-class *mise-en-scène* in *The Godfather* (See Fig. 34). The difference between these two worlds is further emphasised when the scene ends with Frankie banging on the table saying “Aight [sic] then, we back in effect” while the *Godfather*-esque background music abruptly cuts. This signifies that the music and playful mimicry of the scene do not represent the setting and identity of these women, reminding the audience that this is not an archetypal gangster film. Alongside the intertextuality with canonical gangster texts, the film is acutely aware of hip-hop culture and utilises it throughout. When stealing cars, Cleo shuffles through the owners’ CD collections until she finds a hip-hop CD to play (See Fig. 35). This character trait relates the film to hip-hop’s widespread commercial popularity in the 1990s, and of Gray’s background as a rap music video director before moving into feature films.

Despite these intertextual references to gangster films, the film is also notable as a genre hybrid. Ndounou claims that it “illuminates the potential for hybrid forms to articulate black experiences within the confines of existing genres” (2014, 220). The film has a distinct relationship to

contemporaneous 'female friendship' films depicting women in dyadic or group relationships which propagate socially conservative or progressive messages, potentially having a significant influence on the lives of their female viewers (Hollinger, 1998, 25). There are two female friendship films important to this analysis of *Set It Off: Waiting to Exhale* (Whitaker, 1995) and *Thelma and Louise* (Scott, 1991). *Waiting to Exhale*, a success at the box office, follows four middle-class black friends who often meet and discuss their difficulties in finding the right man. This film marked a turning point in two ways for this sub-genre of films: firstly, for being one of the first mainstream intraracial female friendship films directed by an African-American director (Hollinger, 1998, 205); secondly, according to Hollinger, "typically, female friendship films deal with white characters and are aimed at a white audience" (ibid., 180), thus making both *Waiting to Exhale* and *Set It Off* a contrast to the usual female friendship film, at least in this respect. Jada Pinkett has recently claimed that *Set It Off* could have been more successful with mainstream audiences but was marred by marketing which portrayed it as "just an urban film" (Entertainment Weekly, 2018). *Waiting to Exhale's* box office earnings signifies the potential of commercial success for female friendship films about black women.

Thelma and Louise, on the other hand, is a white female friendship film about the titular Thelma (Geena Davis) and Louise (Susan Sarandon) who become outlaws after killing the man who tried to rape the former. These two films illustrate that the female friendship sub-genre can emerge and develop within very different and much broader generic spaces. While *Waiting to Exhale* can be identified as a melodrama, Hollinger claims that *Thelma and Louise* functions in relation to multiple genres: road movie, western, melodrama, gangster film and the female friendship film (1998, 124). Their escape from the law representatives chasing them becomes symbolic for their fight against both inter-personal and institutional patriarchy as they fear the police will not believe their murdering of the rapist was in self-defence. In the final sequence, their fight culminates in a symbolic victory for them. Instead of surrendering to the police, the women decide to drive off a cliff and the film freezes before their car hits the ground (**See Fig. 36**). With this decision to continue their resistance against a patriarchal order, the freeze-frame works as both an intertextual allusion to the buddy-western *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (Hill, 1969) (**See Fig. 37**) and as a way of keeping

these women in a bittersweet, victorious limbo, a place between capture and death. The film parallels most strongly with *Set It Off* through its inversion of gender assumptions. John E. McGrath claims that “in both movies, there are extended scenes of police viewing or responding to these tapes [of their crimes], as though only by repeated viewing can women be fixed into narrative as perpetrators of the phallic act of gunpoint robbery” (2004, 82-83). McGrath’s statement indicates that the relationship between women and violence is one which requires the police characters to adjust their perceptions. He labels gunpoint robbery as a ‘phallic act’, indicating that it is predominantly a masculine activity, and which has frequently been the case in the hood sub-genre. *Set It Off* even contains an explicit dialogue reference to the exploits of Thelma and Louise when Stony initially disapproves of another robbery. Both films are sympathetic towards the dire situations of these women, with Thelma and Louise feeling like they will not be believed by the police, and the women in *Set It Off* each having a personal reason which leaves them little option but to start robbing banks. Therefore, the women across these films only resort to violence due to their desperation. This applies to each woman apart from Cleo, whose masculinised identity seems to be enough to justify her involvement.

Cleo and LGBT+ Representation in Cinema

Cleo is an important character to analyse in the context of both the sub-genre itself and contemporary queer issues. While a hood film about women is a rarity, featuring a black lesbian as one of the key characters is a seemingly radical choice, and contextualisation is necessary before she is explored further. In the 1980s, the AIDS virus affected hundreds of thousands of gay men in large American cities, with many of them facing death in a very short time (Nystrom, 2005, 146). This issue was dealt with ineffectually, as there was a lack of governmental help in managing the AIDS crisis, which increased public awareness of both the crisis and the existence of LGBT+ communities in most metropolitan areas (ibid., 147). This changed in the 1990s, as (partly due to marches) there was increased recognition of the need for policies which could assure a greater degree of equal treatment for the LGBT+ community. In turn, policies such as prohibition of discrimination against LGBT+ persons were implemented by many businesses (ibid.). American cinema was not ignorant to

these changes, and an independent film movement labelled 'New Queer Cinema' functioned as a form and expression that emerged from the cataclysm of AIDS (Pearl, 2004, 24). These films often eschewed 'positive images' and 'happy endings' in favour of complex musings on the nature of gender and sexuality (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006, 220). One prevalent example is Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Women* (1996), a film which explores the underrepresentation of black women in film. It is a pseudo-documentary about a young black lesbian (played by Dunye) who makes a film about a fictional 1930s black actress known for stereotypical 'mammy' roles. It deals with intraracial conflict, interracial desire, the filmmaking process, queer historiography and media analysis. The latter two are themes often found in the work of black queer filmmakers (Wlodarz, 2006, 87). According to Dunye, "*The Watermelon Woman* came from the real lack of any information about the lesbian and film history of African-American women" (Dunye quoted in Stockwell, 1996, 69). This film therefore functioned as a way for Dunye to critically investigate both her own queer identity and the historical exclusion/stereotyping of black women in Hollywood.

Benshoff and Griffin suggest that the success of New Queer Cinema led Hollywood to make more films about gay and lesbian concerns, although whether they employed the same styles and attitudes of this movement is open to debate (2006, 243). One critically successful Hollywood example was *Philadelphia* (Demme, 1993), which earned Tom Hanks the Best Actor Academy Award for his role as a man with AIDS who sues the law firm that fired him because of his condition. *Basic Instinct* (Verhoeven, 1992) can be read as a potential backlash against queer people. Benshoff and Griffin dismiss the film as "yet another Hollywood thriller made by heterosexual men about killer queers" (2006, 250). The film follows the alleged serial murderer, Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone), whose sexuality is weaponised against the male characters (**See Fig. 38**). The LGBT+ community local to the filming locations protested the film vehemently and disturbed its production, feeling that the film was portraying its queer characters in a derogatory manner (Lyons, 2006, 293-294). *Bound* (The Wachowskis, 1996) is an example of a Hollywood lesbian film from the decade, a neo-noir about two lovers who scheme to steal money from the Mafia. While the film is progressive for containing an onscreen lesbian love affair and a happy ending for the duo, it could be read as yet another

Hollywood made-for-men 'lesbian' film which does little to challenge usual male fantasies about female sexuality (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006, 258). Recalling the film's conflicting marketing style, Benshoff and Griffin claim that "it was hyped to the queer community with lesbian bar parties and assorted tie-in gimmicks, but those same steamy promotional girl-on-girl shots were also used in straight men's magazines" (ibid.). This implies that the film's broad demographic was targeted in different ways, with conflicting ideological stances; while it was promoted as progressive to the LGBT+ community, it was also portrayed as the kind of sexualised erotic thriller which mainstream audiences were familiar with at that time following films like *Basic Instinct* (See Fig. 39). Precedence to Cleo's butch identity can be seen in the action genre in the 1990s though, as evidenced through the work of Yvonne Tasker. She claims that action cinema underwent a reformulation in the 1990s, the continued appearance of female protagonists was a contributing factor to that (1998, 72). These roles were often stereotypes like the butch type, and often there is a conflict between femininity and masculinity, as seen in popular films of the time such as *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (Harlin, 1996) (Tasker, 1998, 68). She continues that often, "female action heroes are constructed in narrative terms as macho/masculine, as mothers or as Others" (ibid., 69). It will be explored how Cleo fits two of those categories, embodying both 'masculine' traits and distinct connotations of a gendered 'Other'.

This general conflict in positive/negative representation can be seen in *Set It Off*, especially in its crossover potential and the characterisation of Cleo. A crossover effect is achieved partially through certain casting choices, namely Queen Latifah as Cleo and Dr. Dre as Black Sam. Casting Dre in a supporting role is useful for tapping into the prevalent hip-hop culture, Alfred W. Cramer suggests that "Dr. Dre was instrumental in the creation of gangsta rap, the dominant genre of rap through the mid-1990's" (2009, 367). While this film is potentially an empowering hood film due to its focus on women and the issues they face, it still has connections to the misogyny and stereotyping so frequently evident in hip hop culture. According to Verney, "[Gangsta rap] lyrics routinely referred to women as bitches and whores and depicted them as objects for male sexual gratification rather than as equal partners" (2003, 96). Dre therefore stands for a problematic element of hip-hop (of which

he is a key icon), which contrasts the progressive themes of *Set It Off*. However, his character, Black Sam, is an ally to the women, supplying them with the weapons they need, and accepting them into his masculine environment. The casting of Queen Latifah as Cleo, however, is more synonymous with her rap persona, which is described as adept at various styles, allowing her to slow it down with a love song, deliver a message with the strength of her convictions, or to disrespect unskilled rappers (Bradley and DuBois, 2010, 261). Bradley and DuBois continue by saying that her songs such as *Ladies First* (1989) “constituted an important counterbalance in a rap world that at the time was becoming more brazenly misogynistic” (2010, 261). Through these two casting choices, the film opens itself up for critique as the use of Dre potentially undermines what Latifah stands for, though Cleo herself presents a conflict in positive/negative representation.

As a butch-lesbian, Cleo represents the masculine archetypes common to the genre. She is seen as the most proficient with firearms (**See Fig. 40**), has a moll (gangster’s companion) (**See Fig. 41**) and cares about her car. Halberstam claims if blackness is generally associated with excessive and violent masculinity, then Cleo exploits this association with some success (1998, 29). Cleo’s interest in which car she drives (so that she can fit in) is a symbol of the status she wants to attain as a credible neighbourhood figure (**See Fig. 42**), which permeates generally across the genre. As McArthur states, “the automobile is a major icon in the gangster film/thriller...the visible token of his success” (1972, 30). *Set It Off* applies this idea directly with Cleo’s fascination with the car she drives. After the encounter discussed in **Fig. 42**, she purchases a new lowrider car after the first robbery. As a visible token of her success, she pumps it up and down like the man who taunted her, and she has Ursula perform a sexual tease on the car’s hood (**See Fig. 43**). Cleo performs these masculine stereotypes throughout the film to attain what Halberstam labels a “credible butchness” (1998, 228). This could suggest that the film’s deviance from the masculinised environments seen in other hood films is undermined by Cleo herself. While the film deals with female characters with problems unique to their gender and race, Cleo’s butchness offers signifiers recognisable to the sub-genre, especially in the comfort she has in fulfilling a criminal role (**See Fig. 1**). This comfort connotes Cleo’s credibility as a criminal, which may explain her lack of motivation to commit the robberies compared to the other

women. Keeling claims that Cleo carries the weight of black masculinity so that the other leading women can be recognised as 'ladies' (2007, 124).

Cleo's butch identity denotes that her lesbianism is part of this masculinity. It is conflicting whether her lesbianism is progressive compared to a history of representation which Halberstam labels "cinematic homophobia" (1998, 186). Cleo is not objectified like Tramell in *Basic Instinct*, nor does she offer the kind of self-reflexive critical investigation seen in *The Watermelon Woman*. The other women do not necessarily accept her lesbianism as normal, and they look away when Cleo and Ursula are together (See Fig. 44). Kimberly Springer suggests that "Tisean, Stony, and Frankie's silence around Cleo's lesbianism are indicative of the workings of homophobia and silence in the African-American community" (2001, 188). Despite this homophobia, the women do stick together, even after a couple of arguments, exhibiting the kind of solidarity seen in the female friendship sub-genre. After Frankie initially argues against Tisean having a cut of the robbery earnings due to her cowardice, she realises that it is not the right thing to do and offers her the cut and an apology. Cleo and Stony also argue about a second robbery, and after a seemingly intense disagreement, they manage to move on and forgive each other. This kind of solidarity is not often seen in the hood sub-genre, evinced by the mistrust caused by Bishop's psychotic nature in *Juice*. Cleo's commitment to this solidarity and her masculine persona is what leads to her demise.

During the climax of the film, realising the lack of options they have to escape from the police, Cleo strengthens this idea of female solidarity by choosing to sacrifice her own life so that Stony and Frankie can escape with the money. Cleo leads the police away, allowing her to endure the kind of violent end experienced by cinematic gangsters. Watching the chase on the news with his crew, Black Sam is asked, "ain't that your girls?", to which he responds, "hell yeah". This implies that Cleo has been accepted into the fold, she has finally achieved the kind of status that her persona has sought. However, Black Sam also says, "ain't no escapin' that shit", when he comments on Cleo's situation. Unbeknownst to him and the pursuing police, the women have outsmarted them, Stony and Frankie having managed to escape from that situation. This is emblematic of the women being

underestimated by male figures, seen also when the police repeatedly viewed the robbery camera footage. Cleo's distraction comes to a violent end when she is surrounded by police and they shoot at her car. The car, which once served as a token of her success, has become the site for the price she must pay for embodying masculine genre traditions, and she suffers the fall following her brief rise. There is a cinematic parallel between her car and the ending of *Bonnie and Clyde* (Penn, 1967), where the eponymous couple are also murdered by police forces while in and around their car (**See Fig. 45**). Similarly to the tragic gangsters of 1930s cinema such as Rico in *Little Caesar* and Tony in *Scarface*, Cleo's final moments are defiant and violent. Prior to facing insurmountable odds, Cleo lights a cigarette and pumps her car up and down, enjoying the spoils of her crimes one last time. Royster affirms the idea that all these elements in this sequence are emblematic of formulaic gangster film tradition (2003, 178-179). In discussing the shot of Cleo's body laying lifelessly, Royster claims that it adheres to the audience's familiarity with these images over countless films, yet her body is different from all the others of the past. She is not male or white, she is both large and vulnerable (ibid., 179) (**See Fig. 46**). Royster's claim reiterates the importance of gender in this situation, implying a lack of precedence for this kind of representation. However, it is her articulation of a masculine persona which leads Cleo to go through the same rise and fall which is typical for male anti-heroes in the gangster genre. Springer suggests that her death is the result of her not simply transgressing gender, but also race and heterosexual norms unrepentantly (2001, 193). This punishment for a lack of repentance relates to the censorship of the 1930s gangster films. Here, alongside sharing the disenfranchisement of the 1930s characters, Cleo represents a difference in race, gender and sexuality. With the tumultuous relationship in the 1990s between law enforcement and African-Americans, the government and LGBT+ rights, Cleo's transgressions are punished. There is even a parallel to this real-world context as Cleo's death is broadcast live on the TV, visible to an ensemble of characters including Black Sam and Ursula. This could be read as a reference to the highly-publicised video of the police beating Rodney King, which caused the civil unrest discussed in Chapter One.

Overall, *Set It Off* marks a departure from the typical hood film by following the lives of women in the hood. The film provides complex reasons for why three of the women commit crime, their circumstances not dissimilar to the real socio-economic circumstances faced by African-American women in the 1990s. These circumstances include the plight of black single mothers, a lack of fruitful career opportunities for black women, racist accusations based upon gender and race. Through Cleo, the film manages to engage with conventions of both the gangster and hood film, her butch identity fixed in relation to these stereotypes. Her lesbianism is often a characteristic where the film is often critical (as evident by her friends' reactions and her violent death). Through creating this story about women, the film manages to expand into more areas than just the hood sub-genre, which allows it to create diverse images of black women, certainly compared to the archetypes found in *Boyz N the Hood*.

Chapter Three: “You wanna make some money?”: *Paid in Full*

Hood films in the 2000s and getting *Paid in Full*

As a predominantly 1990s phenomenon, the hood film cycle’s presence in mainstream cinema had diminished in the 2000s. According to Watkins, “the production of ghetto-themed narratives came to a virtual halt by the end of the [1990s]” (2002, 237). However, the sub-genre continued into the twenty-first century, but on a much smaller scale, which can be briefly measured in an example of box office performance. Lesser-known 1990s hood films such as *Fresh* (Yakin, 1994) and *Belly* (Williams, 1998) managed box office returns of \$8M and \$9.6M respectively (Levy, 1999, 518 and 516). However, *Paid in Full* only grossed \$3M (Wexler, 2003, 25). Celeste A. Fisher attributes the fatigue of the sub-genre to its lack of diversity in “images, settings, and themes” (2006, xiii), causing audiences to become tired of them. *Paid in Full* seemingly follows a traditional gangster narrative, with a story involving drug dealing and intraracial violence, arguably adhering to Fisher’s claim that a lack of diverse images and settings affected the financial success of these films. Set in mid-1980s Harlem, the film follows the rise and fall of the black drug dealer, Ace (Wood Harris), and his two partners, Mitch and Rico. Each of them relates to the gangster genre in different ways, as explored throughout this chapter. Certainly, the twentieth century setting illustrates another reason why the film may support Fisher’s claim regarding the cycle’s fatigue. As its setting indicates, the film mostly does not move the cycle forward into the new century in any meaningful way.

The film’s 1980s setting is significant though, as there was an increase of drug use and availability in impoverished inner cities. As Harrison suggests, “the crack epidemic of the 1980s-1990s disproportionately afflicted black communities in the inner cities” (2010, 21). While the film is based on the experiences of former drug dealer, Azie Faison, its setting is significant in the context of the crisis. Russell L. Sharman claims that certain areas of Harlem were partly at the centre of the crack epidemic (2006, 97), while the crisis arrived amid what David J. Maurrasse describes as a “gradually deepening concentration of poverty” (2006, 27). With urban decay plaguing the area and its impoverished residents, the circulation of drugs like crack cocaine increased drug usage and dealing, and is prominent in *Paid in Full*. One of the central reasons for this deepening concentration of

poverty was the Republican presidency of Ronald Reagan from 1981-1989. David Wilson claims that “[Reagan’s] talk and actions unleashed a rhetorical assault on these [ghettos] and reduced resource flow resulting in increased poverty, homelessness, and hopelessness” (2007, 30). As discussed in Chapter One, inner-city black neighbourhoods were neglected by the presidencies of Carter, Reagan, and Bush Snr, while plagued with stereotypical understandings of minorities and ghetto-based crime. The prominence of drug-related crime relates to George Lipsitz’s suggestion that “the dearth of capital in minority neighbourhoods curtails opportunities for other kinds of employment (outside of drug trafficking)” (2006, 11). In an early scene, Ace’s mother (uncredited) begrudgingly accepts money from the drug dealer, Calvin (Kevin Carroll), who is dating her daughter, Cakes (Karen Andrew) (**See Fig. 47**). This has been contextualised by bell hooks in relation to financially-successful criminality being perceived as tolerable by some in urban areas. She suggests that “in black communities, hustling for money, even if that meant lying and cheating, became more acceptable if it brought home the bacon” (2004, 18). As Ace’s mother cannot afford to maintain her integrity, she must accept Calvin’s offer of money. Within the film’s recurrent depictions of materialism, Calvin’s offer is made by flashing his money at the dinner table (**See Fig. 48**). The mother cannot explicitly condemn his ostentatiousness because she silently needs his money. Therefore, this affirms Lipsitz’s claim that “deindustrialisation, unemployment, and lack of intergenerational transfers of wealth undermine parental and adult authority in many neighbourhoods” (2006, 11). Calvin exhibits a cool control over the situation, assured that his money gives him the power to decide for Cakes, not minding what her mother thinks. Whereas Calvin brazenly presents his literal wealth, Mitch displays his wealth through materialistic goods, and the difference between these methods affects how both are perceived.

Mitch: The Hustler

Despite the disrepair of his work environments (**See Fig. 49**), Mitch is a prominent figure in the neighbourhood. As a successful drug dealer, the display of jewellery is one means he uses to showcase his success, particularly his “shimmering” Rolex watch, which correlates with McArthur’s suggestion that clothes are of significance in gangster films, as they mark the “gangster’s increasing

status" (1972, 24). A key incident is when neighbours ogle his new car (**See Fig. 50**). This occurs within a montage sequence as Mitch takes Ace around the neighbourhood in the car. Most of this sequence is focused on the unnamed members of the community who react excitedly to the passing car, rather than on Mitch and Ace. This suggests that the car is symbolic of his success and power, much like Cleo's fascination with the car she drives in *Set It Off*. The car was foreshadowed in an earlier conversation between Ace and Mitch, where Ace says they will have "matching Benzes" in ten years, whereas Mitch claims it would happen in ten days. This short conversation illuminates the difference between what they could each realistically achieve. As the new car scene shows, Mitch's aspirations were not ambitious, they were achievable. Ace is impressed by the car and compares it to a "spaceship". Both Ace's and the neighbourhood's awe can be understood as illustrative of hooks' claim that "black men who could show they had money (no matter how they acquired it) could be among the powerful" (2004, 19). Mitch's success in the drug trade enabled him the opportunity to accumulate and flaunt his wealth, its rapidity related to hooks' suggestion that these young black men committed crime because they "cannot delay gratification" (ibid., 28). The connections between the film and hooks' observations on young, inner-city black hustlers allow it to create characters who tap into contemporary issues. Through his success, Mitch embodies what Ace could be if he changes his lifestyle and embraces the freedom to pursue power and wealth.

Alongside his flashy displays of wealth, Ace and the neighbourhood are drawn to Mitch's persona. Mitch's ability to exude confidence and swagger is what makes him such a prominent figure. In his narration, Ace describes the nightclub setting as "the stage", which alludes to the notion of a performance. He claims notable people were there, and that this is where Mitch belongs. This notion of the 'stage' relates to Erving Goffman's work on self-presentation. He claims that one can express themselves in a certain way to influence how others perceive them (2007, 137). Mitch's flaunting of his new car around the neighbourhood is one example of how he creates this public idea of himself. There is a short montage to illustrate Mitch's popularity in this environment, as he confidently walks through the club, greeting everyone (**See Fig. 51**). More specifically than Goffman's work on

performance, Richard Majors and Janet M. Billson outline the concept of 'cool pose', which refers to how many black men choose to present themselves publicly (1992). Specifically, they claim it is "a ritualised form of masculinity that entails behaviours, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control" (ibid., 4). This cool pose applies to Mitch because of how constructed his persona is. At the club, people turn and look at him, the resident disc jockey announces his arrival, and Mitch basks in the attention. The swagger that he gives off coincides with Majors and Billson's claim that cool pose "provides a mask that suggests competence, high self-esteem, control, and inner strength. It also hides self-doubt, insecurity, and inner turmoil" (ibid., 5). Mitch uses these markers like clothes, jewellery and cars to build an air of confidence and swagger, an air which he capitalises on with his sociability. His frequent presence in populated environments, like the club or by driving around the neighbourhood, help him maintain this image.

In an open conversation with Ace, Mitch has a monologue where he acknowledges his own need for validation. He says,

"I love the game. I love the hustle...if I leave, the fans still gonna love me, man? I get love out here in Harlem, man. I done sold coke on these streets, man. Hash, weed, heroin. As long as niggas is feeling it, a nigga like me can hustle it. That's my gift in life".

In his monologue, Mitch is expressing a desire to be validated by those around him, that his efforts as a drug dealer help him to remain a beloved figure to certain Harlemites. This highlights his own insecurities which justify why he uses cool pose. His role as a hustler has enabled his success, and despite making enough money to get out alive with substantial wealth, his main concern is about losing his spot in the limelight. What this also shows is Mitch's blatant disregard for the victims of drug addiction. His only concern in this context is maintaining his position of power, with no thought for those lives he is ruining by being successful. Mitch's need for validation relates to Warshow's theory that "the thing that is destroyed when [gangsters] die, is something outside themselves – not a man, but a style of life, a kind of meaning" (2001, 103). This reflects Mitch's admission because of the calculated projection of his identity to those around him, and how he is seemingly more afraid of

losing that than his life. Regarding the performative aspects of gangster's appearances, McArthur argues "the figures in the gangster film/thriller proclaim themselves not only by their physical attributes and their roles but also by their dress" (1972, 24). With Mitch, this point is exemplified when he carefully undresses and removes each piece of jewellery, symbolising their function as components which combine to create his persona (**See Fig. 52**). This scene illustrates the extent to which his identity is a construction, each piece of jewellery is ritualistically removed and placed where it belongs. He is careful with each item and the ritualistic placement of each recalls how cool pose is created. When he settles into bed, Mitch looks at his door and the shadows appear in a bar-like pattern, potentially readable as a sign of inevitable failure (**See Fig. 53**). The bars are reminiscent of a prison cell and perhaps appear at this point because his identity is vulnerable.

Mitch's cool persona is disrupted three times in the film. His breakdown over Sonny (Remo Greene) will be explored later, but the second disruption is when he discovers that one of his dealers has been robbed (**See Fig. 54**). Mitch breaks his cool with the dealer and frustratedly asks "ain't you a motherfuckin' man? You wanna let another man take your shit, B?". Through this exchange, Mitch reveals conventional masculine traits; he perceives the dealer as weak because he could not defend himself and react with force. The dealer's failings cause Mitch to question his manhood, as though his manliness is equated to his outer-strength. As a representative of Mitch, this situation forces Mitch to act to maintain his persona, resulting in murdering those responsible for this robbery. This violent act appeals to the sub-genre's hypermasculine conventions, where one must show brute strength to stay afloat in this environment. This hypermasculinity is exhibited throughout the sub-genre through male characters' aggressiveness, seen explicitly in this film with Rico, but briefly here with Mitch. The final disruption is a minor moment when Mitch is imprisoned, during a phone call with his partner, he asks, "have you been keepin' it tight for me?" (**See Fig. 55**). In this short question, Mitch exposes his own masculine insecurities, as this alludes to a fear that his partner is being sexually disloyal. According to Ben Crewe, "prisoners were often paranoid about sexual loyalty" (2009, 425). Mitch's fear is not an isolated incident, but it exposes cracks in his cool persona, even he

is worried that his partner will not wait for him to be released. Mitch's possessive question aligns with Crewe's observation that these prisoners interrogated their partners about their "social movements", asked friends to check on them, and even attempted to prohibit some of their socialising (ibid., 425-426). As someone who controls his life and appearances, this situation places Mitch in a vulnerable position.

When Mitch arrives at the basketball court and Ace invites him to play, he says it is not his "style" anymore to play (See Fig. 56). This further shows Mitch's frequent concern with the image he conveys, and he perceives "getting all sweaty on the court" as a waste of his time and effort. He arrived at the court on a new motorbike, and the short time between acquiring the bike and the aforementioned car indicates the immediacy of success for some of these hustlers at the time. The local kids being drawn to the bike may suggest the cyclical appeal of this lifestyle for those growing up in these urban environments. This idea is further exemplified by Mitch's relationship with Sonny. The brothers live together with their mother, Janet (Joyce Walker Joseph), and uncle, Ice (Ron Cephas Jones). Mitch adopts a paternal role for Sonny because Ice is a drug addict and their mother is largely absent (See Fig. 57). Like in *Boyz N the Hood*, maternity is absent from this family, and Mitch (like Furious) must become the main parental-figure to a child. Mitch's success further undermines their parental authority (similar to Calvin and Ace's mother), and he assumes that role on-screen.

Returning to the idea of being a 'man', Mitch discredits Ice as a 'real man' because he claims he does not handle his business or take care of the family. Mitch uses these two functions to define what a 'real man' is, and potentially mentions fatherhood because, as Ward F. Horn suggests, "African-Americans are disproportionately affected by the problem of father absence" (1999, 2). Masculinity is therefore defined in this circumstance as one's ability to be financially stable and a reliable paternal figure, not by one's strength. This perception of masculinity could relate to hooks' earlier claim that those young black men who could show that they had money were powerful, not those necessarily exhibiting any physical strength. His chronological introduction is a scene of him teaching

Sonny how to properly clean his sneakers using a toothbrush (**See Fig. 58**). According to Michael Hoechsmann, sneakers have “long played an important role in youth cultures...[enabling] a stylised performance” (2001, 272). Mitch is protective and caring over his younger brother, and this introductory scene shows how he is helping Sonny to mould a stylish appearance, which also relates to the nature of a cycle. As Hoechsmann argues, sneakers are therefore an important component of black cultural expression, and Mitch is helping Sonny to present himself well, even commenting that other kids will mock him if he appears with unclean sneakers.

Sonny looks up to Mitch, and features in several scenes where Mitch is visibly successful (such as with the new motorbike and car). In an area of impoverishment, at a time where hustlers can thrive, this can serve as a potential influence on Sonny to follow the same path. In a later scene, Ice tells Mitch that Sonny will follow in his footsteps, but Mitch refuses to listen and continues his paternal relationship with Sonny. Sonny ends up corrupted by Mitch’s influence sooner than expected when he is kidnapped and murdered by a bitter Ice, who sought a hefty ransom payment from Mitch. Sonny pays the price for Mitch’s success with his life, thus reinforcing the film’s moral lesson that a gangster’s success is both temporary and fatal. Sonny’s death fits within sub-genre conventions, as Manthia Diawara claims, “for the black youth, the passage into manhood is also a dangerous enterprise which leads to death both in reality and in film” (1993, 25). Diawara’s observation was directly referring to hood films about rites of passage like *Boyz N the Hood* and *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (Rich, 1991), whereas here, Sonny is a victim of his affiliation with Mitch.

When Sonny is initially kidnapped, the veil of Mitch’s persona slips, and he admits that he “can’t function” with Sonny gone (**See Fig. 59**). His monologue provides him with an emotional vulnerability which helps to humanise in a similar way to his earlier speech. However, much like the earlier monologue, he does not confront his own accountability in this situation, as Sonny would never have been kidnapped if Mitch was not a successful drug dealer. While this arguably trivialises his career, the ultimate demise of him and Sonny reinforces the film’s earlier moral alertness to portray the inevitable dangers facing these hustlers. The scene is filmed with long-takes, barely cutting away,

which allows Mitch's mask to gradually slip before the audience's eyes. After tearing up about Sonny, Mitch becomes angry and murderous, threatening those who have been jealous. Relating this sudden change of emotion, Goffman suggests that when disruptive events occur, some assumptions become untenable, causing feelings of hostility and unease (2007, 143). Mitch's worrying over Sonny does not fit how he regularly projects himself, so this burst of rage can be read as a hypermasculine compensation for vulnerability, he is not comfortable with seeming weak. When the shot cuts to a close-up of Ace, the *mise-en-scène* for each character is noticeably different (**See Fig. 60**). While the backdrop in the shot of Mitch conveys the drab, graffiti-covered environment in which he operates, Ace's background is brightly coloured, covered by a car and no signs that this is in an impoverished area. While Mitch's alludes to the area which he is bound to, the difference in Ace's shot could be foreshadowing their futures, with Mitch never able to leave the ghetto, whereas Ace finds a way to escape.

Mitch and Ace also differ in their employment after the flash-forward opening sequence. In an early scene, the film cuts between Ace working as a dry cleaner and Mitch as he oversees one of his drug dealers. In contrast to Ace, Mitch conducts his business in dingy locales (**See Fig. 49**), denoting the poverty which has affected the area. Intercutting Mitch's incident-free transaction with Ace's work relates to Neale's observation that certain gangsters conduct their business in a "quotidian environment", where their business is more likely to be everyday work rather than an elaborate scheme (2002, 37-38). Therefore, this normalises the ubiquity of drug dealing in this context; Mitch does not concoct any plans, but rather routinely checks in on his dealers. This recurs when both Ace and Mitch have "drop-offs" to complete, implying that both have the same task, but with a different product. The conflict between drug dealing success and inadequate legal employment (that was present with Calvin's flashes of wealth (**See Fig. 48**)) is mainly seen through the contrast between Ace and Mitch.

Ace: The Subversion

Ace is unhappy while working as a dry cleaner, and he is introduced in this space with a dazed look, a point-of-view shot indicating a longing to be part of the outside world (**See Fig. 61**). He is isolated in this environment, and noticeably more comfortable when his work takes him out into the neighbourhood. The point-of-view shot of Ace looking onto the street is used earlier in the film, mainly to engage with the opening sequence's relationship to wider genre conventions. The opening encapsulates the traditional rise-and-fall narrative in just six minutes. This can be read as a playful subversion of genre conventions, as this narrative structure is usually characterised by "steady upward progress" prior to the fall (Warshow, 2001, 102). It also potentially signifies self-awareness on the part of the filmmakers. As a twenty-first century hood film, it comes several years after the sub-genre diminished, this sequence therefore allows for the film to instantly address genre expectations. This playful restructuring of the classic hood film narrative trajectory can be read as an acknowledgment of the proliferation of stories which use the rise-and-fall structure. In the opening, Ace, Mitch and Rico enjoy the spoils of their success, including making arbitrary wagers of thousands of dollars (**See Fig. 62**). Following this, Ace is attacked off-screen and left in a seemingly critical condition, receiving medical treatment. While this structure is archetypally stretched across the entire runtime, its usage here suggests just how short-lived the taste of success is. Ace's hustling career ending before the audience has seen it begin anchors the allegorical nature of this structure, positioning these hustlers' exuberant lifestyles as temporary before their inevitable failure. This unique utilisation of the rise-and-fall structure is a rare occasion where the film deviates from its genre predecessors. While Ace is being treated, the point-of-view shot is his hallucination of money falling from the sky onto the street below (**See Fig. 63**). This shot links between the opening sequence and the introduction of Ace as a dry cleaner, therefore carrying ideological meaning. This shot and transition allows the film to implicitly suggest that money is out on the streets, ready to be made, but he must escape the trappings of his employment and pay the price for chasing it. In this small chain of shots, the key beats of the structure are encapsulated.

Ace is frequently shown to be Mitch's contrast. In the scene of Ace and Mitch at the basketball court (**See Fig. 56**), Mitch refusing to join Ace on the other side of the fence further illustrates crucial

differences between them. Mitch does not want to play basketball as it may compromise his calculated appearance, whereas Ace admits that he does not share Mitch's aesthetic. Throughout the film, it becomes clear that Ace either does not share this need to present himself in a certain way, or simply cannot do so. Mitch enjoys 'the stage', whereas Ace is visibly uncomfortable, despite being at the height of his success (See Fig. 64). It is these qualities that make him subversive to typical gangster identities. The quick-cut montage sequence of Ace at the club directly contrasts the earlier scene of Mitch smoothly moving across the club, welcomed by everyone. In the earlier scene, Ace said that "when the lights caught [Mitch], he always looked good". This second montage shows Ace blinded and in discomfort when the lights catch his eyes. The stage is not his domain, he has no control over it and admits that he does not like it there. The short shot lengths in Ace's montage explicitly illustrate his discomfort in this domain. According to Murray Forman, "bravado and machismo" imbues the male characters in most hood films (2002, 277). Ace subverts this trend through his lack of machismo, he does not exert the traits which typify many leading characters in the sub-genre. This may help to diminish some of the critiques of the sub-genre that the films sensationalise the lifestyles and impoverishment of neighbourhoods like this one.

The difference between Ace and Mitch is demonstrated once more when Mitch comes out of prison and Ace goes on another drive around the neighbourhood with him (See Fig. 65). Ace doing this *with* Mitch instead of while Mitch is imprisoned shows that he does not share his persona. This dynamic adds some diversity to typical hood film imagery of drug dealing characters as larger-than-life, showing that Ace is comfortable out of the spotlight while allowing Mitch to revel in it. Ace not being a subversive image of a hood film gangster is compounded by his girlfriend, Kiesha (Regina Hall), calling him "boring". Countering the hustler swagger which typifies hood film drug kingpins like Nino Brown (Wesley Snipes) in *New Jack City*, Ace is not a traditional gangster figure. His boring personality is not demonised by his girlfriend, as she is not impressed by his rolls of money and calls herself boring too. Amidst what Ndounou refers to as "flat and stereotypical characterisations of black women" in the sub-genre (2014, 216), this interaction between Ace and Kiesha shows promise towards challenging these stereotypes. However, the brevity of their relationship on-screen

undermines any potential of challenging these stereotypes present in prominent hood films like *Boyz n the Hood* and *Menace II Society*.

Ace's career as a drug kingpin fits within typical narratives found in hood films such as *New Jack City*. As this uses the rise-and-fall structure, the notion of the American dream must be returned to. In the context of an impoverished area like 1980s Harlem, it appeared to the film's young black men that one's full potential can seemingly only be reached with an ascendancy in the drug trade. This is explicit in the narrative when Ace was playfully mocked by both Calvin and Mitch for his lesser work at the dry cleaners. Calvin goads Ace by saying, "Hey, yo, Hop Sing, why don't you keep workin' hard, 'cause it's gonna pay off". Calvin makes the racial implication that Ace's job is unskilled labour that he expects to be done by an East-Asian immigrant. Along with this remark, he implies in this conversation and throughout the first act that working this job will not make Ace successful with either money or women, two things Calvin prides himself on (**See Fig. 66**). Similarly, Mitch more playfully teases Ace about his work, saying Ace will "be the George Jefferson of the ghetto". This name refers to the protagonist of the spin-off sitcom series, *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985). Jefferson was a black entrepreneur who had his own successful dry-cleaning company in New York City. Jefferson's story parallels the American dream in its intended form, someone who could become a successful business owner despite their circumstances, their hard work and ambition allowing them to fulfil their potential. The playful referencing of Jefferson here to mock Ace exemplifies the impossibility of the American dream in this context. With Reagan's presidency and the growing impoverishment in areas like this Harlem neighbourhood, both Calvin and Mitch belittle Ace's attempts to live honestly. As hooks suggests, "often black males choose crime to avoid the hierarchy in the workforce that places them on the bottom" (2004, 28). Both Calvin and Mitch serve as temptations for Ace, reminding him that honest work is not worthwhile when they are doing so much better as drug dealers. However, Ace fits as a subversion because of his indifference to the drug trade from the beginning and throughout. He admits later in the film that he does not see any love in the trade, he never disrespected Mitch but did not seek the glamour that Mitch needed. He simply saw easy money to be made and chased that rather than anything more. To compensate for

Ace not embodying many masculine gangster traits, Rico exhibits characteristics closely anchored to conventions.

Rico: The Gangsta

Rico's name itself functions as a potential signifier of his relationship to the early phase of the genre, alluding to the central figure from *Little Caesar*. The two share similar characteristics, as both are brash and eager to reach the top of the criminal underworld, their greed leading them to their downfall. Rico is reminiscent of the old gangsters who fulfil the rise-and-fall narrative, as his brashness allows his demise to be restoration of a kind of moral equilibrium. His brash nature is exhibited throughout the film, he does not hesitate to resort to confrontation and violence to settle any form of conflict, explicitly contrasting Ace (**See Fig. 67**). In the scene where Ace is discussing Calvin's issues with him, Rico invades their conversation and inflates the conflict between Ace and Calvin. Ace tries but fails to contain Rico on this, and multiple occasions, which implies that Rico only respects his own hypermasculine authority. In this scene, Rico refers to himself both in the third-person and as a "soldier". Rico in *Little Caesar* also referred to himself in the third-person, which further links the connections between the characters; this form of address accentuates how larger than life the character views himself, he undermines anyone higher on the ladder than himself. The use of 'soldier' also exemplifies the difference between the three characters. Ace subverts genre tradition, Mitch is a hustler and Rico is a 'gangsta'. Whereas Mitch is flashy with the goods he has purchased, Rico flashes his guns, creating a violent persona which he frequently lives up to (**See Fig. 68**). Alongside using violence to craft his persona, Rico plays a sex tape of himself at the club, which displays his sexual proficiency (**See Fig. 69**). Rico himself embodies the hypermasculine hood film conventions outlined by Abraham, who claims the sub-genre contains "black sexual adventurousness, and gratuitous spectacles of gang violence, drugs, and crime" (2003, 89). In the tape, Rico is wearing his medallion and drinking champagne, adding to the spectacle of his persona. Whereas Ace generally avoids displaying his riches, and Mitch wants to be loved, Rico basks in the lifestyle for everyone to see (**See Fig. 70**). His aggression and sex tape bring to the film the gratuitous spectacles which Abraham argues typify the sub-genre. His identity and reinforcement of sub-genre

conventions undermine the film's efforts to stand out amongst generic 2000s hood films like *State Property* (Abbott, 2002), which does not deviate from the conventional formula.

The extent to which Rico is glorified by his aggressive masculinity is undone by his actions later in the film. In his greedy pursuit for power, Rico murders Mitch to acquire his large quantity of cocaine, intended to be used to recover Sonny (**See Fig. 71**). Regarding the crossover of gangster conventions to the hood sub-genre, Fisher suggests there is "an unquestionable loyalty to 'family' similar to that seen among gang members in hood films, [the films] construct violent, aggressive, and chauvinistic definitions of masculinity" (2006, xvi). While Rico embodies those definitions of masculinity with his aggression, his deception and greed oust him from the conventions of loyalty and turn him into the film's main antagonist. As Mitch has been built up as a sympathetic character, and his aim was to save his young brother's life, Rico's murderous act is an irredeemable choice which twist his traits from being seemingly glorified to villainous. Rico's undermining of Ace beforehand was more him displaying his own nature rather than a betrayal. Ace's choice to inform the police about Rico in the film's climax is another example of Ace not being a traditional gangster. This choice is the downfall of Rico, and Ace's breakage of the same ties of loyalty are represented as acceptable because of Mitch's death. The film's omission of a prominent police presence allows a focus on the conflict within those in the drug trade vying for power. This creates antagonists out of people formerly close to Ace, namely Calvin and Rico. Having not committed any acts of violence in the film, Ace defies stereotypes of the brutish masculinity which dominate the sub-genre, and his accepted informing of Rico provides further subversion of violent trends. In critiquing the sub-genre, Watkins suggests that "sex and violence" became staple images to create a common-sense version of authenticity (2002, 238). Ace counters these stereotypes throughout in both his actions and personality. Whereas the young men in *Juice* are pressured to snitch under duress and ultimately resort to violence, Ace chooses to snitch of his own will, putting himself in a position where he can avoid violence.

A final relation between Rico and the classical gangster characters comes when he chooses to snitch on drug dealers in his network. He chooses to only inform on those working outside of Harlem

because he believes that when his prison sentence finishes, he's going to return and "be the king". Despite being arrested for a serious crime, Rico believes in himself to avoid reform and pursue criminal success once he is released. This relates to McArthur's claim that "criminals are born, not made; they are incapable of reform and can be stopped only by being destroyed" (1972, 39). Rico's choice also reaffirms his lack of loyalty and undoes his tough persona because he cannot face completing his full prison sentence. His ambition to return to the drug trade suggests that he could have only been stopped if he suffered a similar fate to the gangsters in *Little Caesar* and *Scarface*.

Scarface and Sensationalism

Regarding *Scarface*, the film has several intertextual allusions to De Palma's remake throughout. The most explicit reference point occurs in a scene which cuts between Ace watching the remake in a crowded cinema while Mitch assassinates the person who robbed him (See Fig. 72). The choice to inter-cut the crowd enjoying the film with Mitch killing the robber brings attention to the film's diegesis, namely the difference between reality and fiction. While a crowd cheer and enjoy the film's violent climax, Mitch's scene affirms his own credibility and authenticity as a gangster. This is especially notable when Ace is involved in the audience, therefore dissociating him from the perils of being a gangster. As Ace at this point had just entered the drug trade, he has the luxury of seeing the film and being able to enjoy and disassociate his story from it, whereas Mitch does not get this luxury. *Scarface* has also been used in other hood films, like *New Jack City* (See Fig. 73), for a similar purpose of giving credibility to the character-as-gangster. Narrating the crowd's enthusiastic enjoyment of the film, Ace claims they "love seeing a poor-ass Cuban just blow up to be the man all by himself". This relates strongly to the idea of the American dream in this time of inner-city impoverishment. Tony's story is not dissimilar to Ace and Mitch's, whereas they are dealing with what it means to be African-American rather than a refugee. As discussed in Chapter Two, *Scarface* deals with the allure and ultimate fallibility of the American dream. The story of these inner-city hustlers follows the same path as Tony's, they are drawn to making a lot of money fast, yet they face mortal danger for making this choice.

There is another allusion to *Scarface* later in the film when a 'World is Yours' mug is shown in close-up when Ace is being attacked in his apartment (See Fig. 74). This intertextual allusion has a different function, serving as a reminder of the rise-and-fall structure, much like the phrase's usage in the ending of De Palma's remake (See Fig. 75). In De Palma's remake, Tony dies and falls into a fountain with a statue bearing the phrase, the film's coda therefore becoming a warning of the enticement of the American dream. This message is reinforced in the mug shot in *Paid in Full*, where it is introduced at the point in which the narrative has transitioned into Ace's 'fall'. Warshow comments that, in fact "the world is not ours, but it is not his either, and in his death he 'pays' for our fantasies" (2001, 107). His comment here applies to the structure's function to show the inevitability of failure for the gangsters who aim to reach the top. Further to this, Warshow claims these gangsters are "punished for success" (ibid., 103). Whereas this punishment was dealt by the police in films like *Little Caesar* and *White Heat*, in both *Scarface* (1983) and *Paid in Full*, it is another drug dealer who causes the anti-heroes' downfall. This could suggest an acknowledgment that there is more than one person vying for power. The deaths of Tony and Mitch, and the severe beating of Ace, are the result of the violent greed of another power-hungry drug dealer. This notion of greed leading to the downfall, as opposed to the jealous paranoia which affected Rico and Tony in *Little Caesar* and *Scarface* (1932), reinforces the cautionary aspect of the structure, that the gangster's success cannot evade punishment.

These allusions are perhaps also a way for the filmmakers to acknowledge the tiredness of the genre, particularly this structure, and what it means to make a hood film ten years after the cycle had peaked. Whereas the opening showed how the rise-and-fall structure could be distilled into a few minutes, this allusion is an explicit turning point into the latter stage of the narrative. However, perhaps a hope is conveyed at the crowd's rowdy enthusiasm for *Scarface*'s climax, possibly suggesting that a contemporary gangster film with this structure can still reinvigorate an audience's engagement. This may ring especially true with Ace's narration that it was Tony's identity which they identified with, thus allowing a film like *Paid in Full* to potentially resonate with a similar demographic. *Scarface* is an important text not just to this film, but also to hip-hop culture. The film

has been referenced and sampled by many prominent artists including Nas, Ice Cube, Jay-Z, and Ice-T (See Fig. 76). Regarding the reason for rap's appropriation of this film, Pramaggiore and Wallis suggest that rappers ignore the cautionary tale and identify with his status as an outsider who succeeds against the odds (2008, 368). Their point is therefore that it is the character and his story which they latch onto, not necessarily how his story ends. This story about an outsider who forged his own path to success relates to Watkins' claim that gangsta rappers generally aimed "to give voice to the alienation and rage experienced by many young, dislocated black males" (2002, 240). The use of *Scarface* in *Paid in Full* is therefore one which was seemingly gratuitous with the cinema scene, yet ultimately cautionary with Ace's downfall. Whereas in hip-hop, specifically gangsta rap, there is a greater celebration for the film and Tony, the rappers seemingly armed with the belief that his fictional legacy can be continued through their own music and persona (See Fig. 77).

Although this conflict between positive and negative imagery is seen throughout the film, it is not easily discernible to what extent the film celebrates this kind of life. The film downplays Mitch and Ace's accountability in both Sonny's kidnapping and the debilitating effects of drug use. The only time where Mitch is confronted explicitly about the negative effects dealing drugs comes when Ice tells him that he is getting high on the drugs Mitch sold him (See Fig. 78). However, Mitch dodges taking responsibility here by claiming he sold the drugs so that Ice could make money. Not only does Mitch deny his own responsibility in the drugs crisis (which has entered his own home), he reacts violently to Ice and throws him out, thus choosing to ignore the problem rather than confront it. Neither Mitch or Ace admit to their role in perpetuating to their community's impoverishment, or that they are doing the wrong thing. This has wider implications on the film's ethical position considering it is based on the true story of Azie Faison, whose book about his life and time as a drug dealer serves as the influence for the film's screenplay. This is especially recognisable in the film's ending where an older Ace, who escaped the drug trade with some of his riches, sees a mirage of a happy Mitch, still enjoying life on the stage. According to Neale, this by itself is not necessarily problematic, as hood films were occasionally marked "by motifs of redemption or regeneration" in a

similar vein to biopics (2002, 40). It is clear in the film that Ace learned his lesson from his near-death experience, he decides that the trade is not worth his life.

However, the message is muddled in this ending when there is a seeming critique of contemporary hip-hop, with Ace's narration implicitly referencing 'studio gangstas'. Elijah Lossner defines these as rappers who responded to the popularity of the gangster-cum-rapper trope by creating a persona which conformed to this despite it not being their reality (2007, 325). Regarding the importance of this deception, he claims gangsta rap's appeal is the assumption of authenticity, and there was "much resentment" toward these studio gangstas from those who considered themselves the real thing (ibid., 325-326). In the film, Ace witnesses a music video shoot which recreates the liveliness of the stage witnessed earlier in the film, yet this is a commercial construct (**See Fig. 79**). Ace says, "you can see our story on music videos, with prop guns and fake champagne...I guess you can just front like somebody you ain't". Ace's comments here and the film's construct of the stage for this video directly relates to the notion of studio gangstas, he is calling out this production for being an illegitimate recreation of his own experiences. Ironically, Ace's sentiment that their story is retold in music videos was especially true when Young Jeezy remade the film for the music video of his song *Soul Survivor* (2005), which even features Cam'ron as Rico (**See Fig. 80**). The film therefore has a *Scarface* effect on the hip-hop culture because it could be a chance for artists to validate their own authenticity as a gangster, as Jeezy is attempting with his video. The casting of the rapper Cam'ron as Rico in *Paid in Full* certainly raises the debate over his credibility as an authentic gangster, not a studio gangsta. As one's credibility as an authentic gangster is integral to gangsta rap, this role was a chance for Cam'ron to validate his own legitimacy. When auditioning for the part, Cam'ron did this by allegedly bringing a real gun to the audition (Hip Hop Motivation, 2014). By doing this, Cam'ron is setting the tone that his performance is one grounded in his reality, that he is not dealing with the 'prop guns' that Ace references. This creates another shared characteristic to classic gangster films as certain stars from the genre's 1930s period, including James Cagney, also sought to provide credibility to their tough screen personas. According to Anthony Burke Smith, "Cagney's public persona as an Irish tough guy emerged out of his own biography" (2009, 114). Therefore, the concept

of the studio gangsta is not a new phenomenon, but perhaps a modern representation of what figures like Cagney sought to avoid. This use of studio gangstas is another way *Paid in Full* is recognisably a twenty-first century hood film, this subject matter is more contemporary in nature than the film's prior concerns.

Alongside its use of the rise-and-fall structure, the film does avoid sensationalising this lifestyle in certain sequences. To contrast the intentionally cinematic scene of Mitch assassinating the robber while Ace watched *Scarface*, violence in other sections of the film are usually grounded with a handheld filming style, especially when Ace and Rico confront a thief (**See Fig. 81**). This scene maintains a handheld style across its 90 seconds, using only six shots for the whole scene. This restrained approach creates an atmosphere of uncompromising authenticity. Regarding this approach, there is a rather unceremonious murder of the supporting character, Lulu (Esai Morales), the drug dealer who supplies Ace (**See Fig. 82**). This is notable because it is not a typically macho or gratuitous spectacle, it is a murder which is not shown, and the motive and murderer are never revealed. This allows the film to deviate from indulging in the violence, and instead, representing the same sudden, unexpected downfall that befalls Ace later in the film. There are other cinematic techniques utilised in the film to convey a more cautionary message, as evident in the match-cut between a critically-injured Ace and his new-born child (**See Fig. 83**). This fade can be read in multiple ways, it is potentially a sign of something which gives Ace something to live for, a reason to leave the drug trade. However, it could also be a depiction of the cyclical nature of violence in the hood, alluding to the inevitability of one generation's failings latching onto the next. Ace succumbed to the temptations of criminality, so perhaps his child is bound to do the same if he faces the same poor circumstances.

The conflict between positive and negative representations are exemplified by the film's twist at the end that the narrative was based on a true story. This revelation reinforces the film as a traditional cautionary tale, while also creating sympathetic characters out of drug dealers who ignore their role in perpetuating the national drugs crisis. Ace's victory at the end is a happy-ending, as is the bitter-

sweet resolution for Mitch. This calls into the question to what extent the film celebrates or demonises this lifestyle. Guerrero suggests that “we should view [hood films] as vehicles through which society’s racial contradictions, injustices, and failed policies are mediated” (1993, 190). Guerrero’s point foregrounds the importance of the sub-genre’s socio-political climate, emergent due to its specific set of conditions despite their potentially exploitative failings. Such conditions find articulation through long-standing genre conventions and iconography adapted according to the specificities of the black urban experience. However, according to Sheila Kunkle, “[a film ending] provides the pause wherein a meaning can retroactively be proffered, but a meaning that will always be multi-layered, ambiguous, and incomplete” (2016, 5). Therefore, the film’s moral ambiguity is not resolved by the ending, it is simply another occasion for reflection on this matter.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has explored the hood sub-genre through a critical analysis of the two case studies, *Set It Off* and *Paid in Full*. Prior to this analysis, Chapter One set up the socio-economic and industrial context which preceded the sub-genre. Issues related to African-American representation on-screen was explored, such as the star persona of Sidney Poitier, which displayed the difficulty of African-American assimilation into Hollywood. The other strands set up in this chapter ahead of analysis of the case studies were namely the societal unrest in the 1990s and the importance of the 1930s gangster formula to the hood films. The case studies were analysed to engage with key areas of the sub-genre. Their relation to the gangster genre was an important element which has been thoroughly explored, the relationship is argued to be both a structural and intertextual one. The rise-and-fall structure was referenced throughout the chapters as it was the archetype of many 1930s gangster films, and its presence is noted in hood films, especially through its use in *Paid in Full*. The film uses it in multiple ways, its opening sequence playfully encapsulates the structure, functioning as both a moral tale of how shortly-lived the taste of success is and as an acknowledgment of the proliferation of this structure in the genre. In contrast, *Set It Off* does not use this structure generally, it is instead deployed as a result of Cleo embodying the sub-genre's typical masculine archetypes. The structure therefore has a different function in each case study, yet both functions relate to gangster genre tradition. With *Paid in Full*, the opening sequence signifies how prevalent the structure has become in the genre generally. *Set It Off* uses it to punish Cleo for her butch identity (her difference in gender and sexuality), and therefore relates to the structure's use as a form of censorship in the 1930s gangster films.

Intertextual references with gangster films occur frequently in the sub-genre, further validating its status as a subset of the gangster genre. *Set It Off*'s cynicism of the American dream is readable through a potential allusion to *Scarface* (Hawks and Rosson, 1932 and De Palma, 1983). Indeed, both case studies allude to *Scarface* at the turning point of the narrative, where the characters begin to experience their fall. This is signified in *Paid in Full* through a mug which states, 'The World is Yours', a phrase significant in *Scarface* (See Fig. 74). The mug appears when Ace's life falls apart, thus

reinforcing the phrase's connotation in the *Scarface* films that the gangster's failure is inevitable.

Paid in Full also references *Scarface* in a more explicit manner by having a fictional audience joyously watch De Palma's film in a crowded cinema. This reference allowed for consideration of *Scarface*'s importance to hood films and hip-hop culture. *Scarface* is not the only explicit gangster film reference point for the cycle of films. *White Heat* was featured in *Juice*, and adored by its antagonist, while *Set It Off* mocked *The Godfather* to draw attention to these working-class women operating in a uniquely masculine space.

The economic circumstances of the films' settings was also analysed using scholarly work. The circumstances surrounding the women in *Set It Off* was explored, as each of them has a different reason for resorting to crime. For example, Frankie's issues with workplace discrimination were tied to a study by Catalyst (2004), her credibility was scrutinised and undone by false accusations by white authority figures, mirroring how African-American women have to overcome certain racial barriers. Whereas Frankie was a diligent bank teller, Tisean is presented as a struggling mother whose dismal economic and welfare opportunities were not sufficient for her to be able to look after her child. This diverse group of African-American women allows for more layered female representation in contrast to what has been discussed as typical for the sub-genre through the brief analysis of *Boyz N the Hood*. However, Cleo's identity and demise challenges the film's progressiveness with its female representation. Despite being a largely female story, the chapter argues that Cleo embodies many of the masculine archetypes which are prevalent in the sub-genre, and, as mentioned, her death can be read as a punishment for her masculinised identity, therefore undermining the film's otherwise progressive representation of women. The core focus of this chapter is an examination of the film's gender and sexual identity politics, issues which are traditionally male-centric in the sub-genre. This subversive gendering was partially explained through the film's genre hybridity, it was contextualised as also relating to the female friendship films of the 1990s.

Chapter Three also explored economic circumstances, but in relation to *Paid in Full* and its 1980s setting. The film presents the impoverishment plaguing the area in both its mise-en-scène and narrative beats. While Ace feels he must begin dealing drugs in order to be financially successful, it was established beforehand in the mise-en-scène that the neighbourhood is in disrepair, and his mother is silently grateful for the money provided by Calvin's criminality. One of the reasons for the inadequate economic condition of both films has been attributed to the Republican presidencies in place during their settings. As discussed in Chapters One and Three, the Republican presidencies in this period disparaged African-Americans and caused economic recessions which deepened the concentration of poverty in inner-city neighbourhoods. The hustling sub-culture present in *Paid in Full* becomes a viable career because of the dearth of capital for African-Americans in these communities. This sub-culture is analysed in great depth in the chapter, specifically how the main characters project their identities through symbols of their success, as exemplified by Mitch, whose materialism defines and maintains his identity. His place in the neighbourhood is dependent on his continued exhibition of materialistic success, as evident in his neighbourhood joyriding and immaculate appearance. Ace counters this through his social awkwardness and "boring" personality, therefore going against the conventional image of the drug kingpin as larger-than-life, as seen in hood films like *New Jack City*. Rico demonstrates another masculine image. He embodies the three components of hypermasculinity as outlined in the introduction, "(a) the view of violence as manly, (b) the view of danger as exciting, and (c) callous sex attitudes toward women" (Zaitchik and Mosher, 1993, 232). He is aggressive, confrontational, openly virile and ruthless. He does not want to be contained within the carefully organised operation which Ace runs, instead he wants to be like the gangsters of the 1930s films, he wants to be at the top.

The presence of hip-hop in the sub-genre was discussed across the chapters. Often, the relationship between the films and hip-hop would be based on 'crossover', referring to the films' appropriation of hip-hop culture to maximise profits. This comes through strongly in both case studies through their casting of hip-hop artists. In *Set It Off*, Queen Latifah plays Cleo, which both contrasts and appeals to her rap persona. While both are powerful women, Latifah's fight against the misogyny present in hip-

hop is not fought by Cleo, who instead subscribes to typical perceptions of masculinity. In *Paid in Full*, the engagement with the concept of studio gangstas allows it to be a more contemporary hood film, which is arguably a necessity considering its arrival several years after the peak of the sub-genre. The film's usage of *Scarface* (1983) could also be considered part of its crossover appeal due to the importance of *Scarface* within hip-hop. Cam'ron arguably uses the character of Rico to affirm his own validity as a gangsta rapper. With the film's final message regarding studio gangstas, Cam'ron allegedly bringing a real gun to his audition gives him the credibility which rappers need to sustain their image as a gangsta. However, the comparison between his audition and the actions of past genre stars such as James Cagney demonstrates once more how linked these eras of gangster films are in their construction on and off-screen.

Overall, the case studies have been analysed critically using scholarly work and sequence analysis to explore the ways in which they relate to several factors, namely the hood sub-genre, the gangster genre, the socio-economic environment of their setting. Chapter One's contextualisation of the struggles of industrial and on-screen representation for African-American filmmakers and stars was important in setting up the exploration of racial representation in the sub-genre. The representations of blackness in hood films has been argued to often relate to criminality. This criminality is often depicted as organised crime carried out by the films' characters in order to escape their economic impoverishment. *Set It Off's* female ensemble subverted the sub-genre's gender conventions yet still subscribed to some masculine traditions through the character of Cleo. The economic impoverishment among African-American women at the time was explored to make sense of each character's decision to commit crime. On the other hand, *Paid in Full's* contrasting characters allowed for consideration of what masculinities are projected and how. The relationship both texts have with the gangster genre was especially worthy of analysis, each contained intertextual and structural allusions. Following from the peak of this cycle, certain prominent hood film directors have managed to integrate into Hollywood with varying degrees of success. F. Gary Gray, the director of *Set It Off*, quickly integrated into mainstream filmmaking in the 2000s. However, not all hood directors were successful, other directors like Ernest Dickerson and Leslie Harris have spoken out

about their alienation and exclusion from Hollywood following issues with studio prejudice (Ugwu, 2019). The opposing fate of these African-American directors represents a continuation of the same difficulty of assimilation that has occurred throughout film history, as explored in Chapter One. However, the existence and commercial success of the cycle suggests promise for the future.

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Illustrations



Fig. 1: Cleo's butch-femme identity marks her as a masculine figure among the other women in the group. Halberstam (1998) argues that her masculinity is just as much of a product of her lesbianism as it is her upbringing as a black woman in the hood. Cleo revels in her criminality. She is at ease in the police line-up, able to intimidate her accuser without seeing her.



Fig. 2: The artificiality of *Paid in Full's* ending is related to the notion of 'studio gangsters'. As the ending narration claims, "I guess you don't have to be somebody no more...you can just front like somebody you ain't", a stark contrast to the film's representation of the reality of its 1980s setting.



Fig. 3: Cortés cites the first two instalments of *The Godfather* (Coppola, 1972-1974) for creating the then-contemporary archetype of Italian-Americans as criminals (2010, 362). The films chart the trials and tribulations of an Italian-American family involved at a high level of crime in twentieth century New York; from the patriarch's immigration from Italy to America, to the transformation of the youngest son from an outsider to the family's ruthless boss.



Fig. 4: Members of the Bloods gang in front of a grave belonging to a seemingly fellow gang member. Bloods are identifiable through their red clothing and signature hand sign.



Fig. 5: In its position as a cinematic landmark, *Birth of a Nation* perpetuated the fear that black men were sexual predators, lusting after white women. After Elsie is kidnapped by Lynch, she must be saved by the Ku Klux Klan, who controversially function as the film's protagonists.



Fig. 6: Sidney Poitier in *No Way Out* as a doctor whose ethics are tested upon treating a bigoted criminal. His will is tested by the racist patient, yet he remains strong and does not falter in his duty of care despite the intense racism he is subjected to.



Fig. 7: Sammy Davis Jr. performing in the vaudeville act Will Mastin Trio alongside his father and Mastin. They successfully performed to celebrities in the California nightclub *Ciro's* during the 1950s, boosting Davis' stardom.



Fig. 8: The Rat Pack comprised of Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., Peter Lawford, Joey Bishop (left to right). The group performed on stage in Las Vegas casinos and headlined films such as *Ocean's 11* and *Sergeants 3* (Sturges, 1962).



Fig. 9: An example of a joke at Davis' expense in *Ocean's 11* where the white members of the Rat Pack apply shoe polish to their faces. Davis' identity as a black man is mocked by Lawford's remark. Davis is marked as an outsider in the films and stage shows, sequences such as this remind the audience of his otherness. While Davis is seemingly accepted into the group, these jokes diminish his stature as an 'equal'.

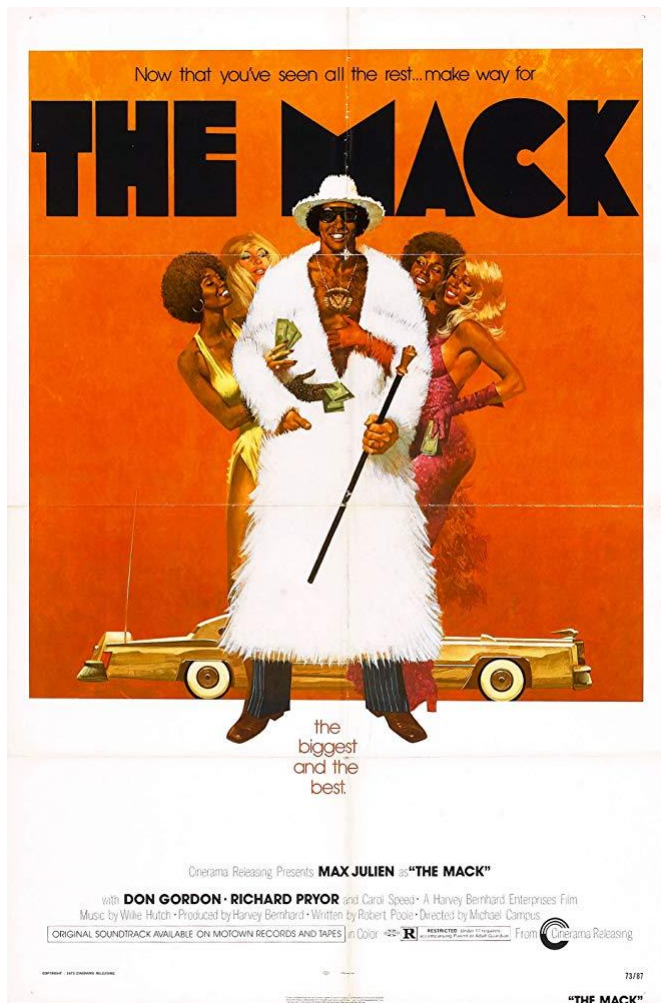


Fig. 10: The poster for *The Mack* displays the opulence of the title character, from his fur coat to his gold-painted Cadillac. The women who work for him are shown to gladly be doing so, wrapping their arms around him, connoting his charm and allure. The film's tagline of 'the biggest and the best' could be read as his sexual prowess.



Fig. 11: *Midnight Cowboy* uses nightmarish montages as a way of revealing more about the characters and their emotions rather than a conventional flashback. The protagonist, Joe (Jon Voight), is accosted and abused by the local townspeople when they find out about his love affair with a local girl, but this story is told in this surreal way to convey Joe's fractured state of mind.



Fig. 12: Like Nolte's character in *48 Hrs.*, De Niro's character in *Showtime* counteracts the verve of Murphy's persona, he is stern and pragmatic. *Showtime* attempts to satirise the conventions of buddy movies, but often falls prey to those same conventions, mainly the chemistry arc between the two leads (from opposites to friends), which is a staple of the sub-genre.

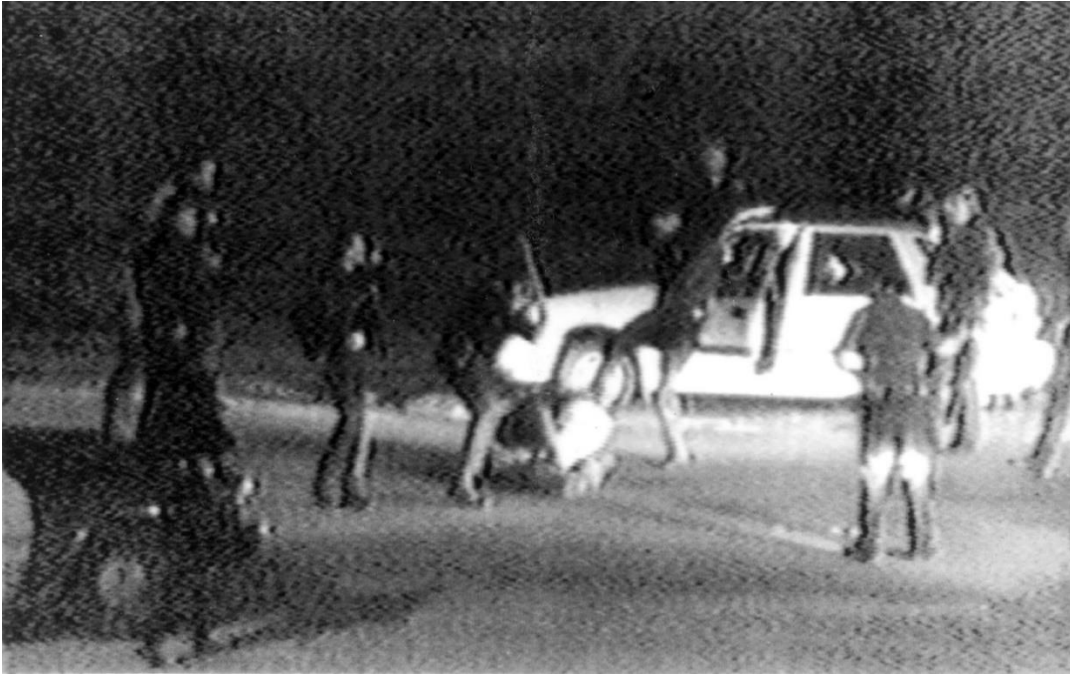


Fig. 13: The video footage of the assault on Rodney King brought to the surface the racial tensions which had been bubbling in America at the time. It reminded America that racial inequality was still pervasive in the country, a hierarchy compounded by the acquittal of these officers.



Fig. 14: An example of some of the damage caused by the L.A. riots. The riots became a release for the frustrations which the Rodney King case brought forth. Many properties were looted or destroyed.

Los Angeles Times

CIRCULATION
1,364,388 DAILY / 1,531,517 SUNDAY

FRIDAY, MAY 1, 1992
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DAILY 35¢
DESIGNATED AREAS HIGHER

Looting and Fires Ravage L.A. 25 Dead, 572 Injured; 1,000 Blazes Reported

COLUMN ONE

South L.A. Burns and Grieves

■ Life has been hard in the neglected area for years. But now, as self-inflicted wounds mount, residents fear for the future.

By JONATHAN PETERSON
and HECTOR TOBAR
TIMES STAFF WRITERS

In a smoky parking lot in South Los Angeles, Ruby Galtade, 55, stared in disbelief at the wreckage of her local grocery store. "I'm a diabetic. This is where I get all my juices and foods," she said, peering at shards of glass and soaked debris. "What am I going to do now?"

A few miles away, Paul C. Hudson arrived at his family-run savings and loan, a community fixture since 1947 in a neighborhood that has a grave shortage of banks. On Wednesday night it burned down.



Los Angeles County sheriff's deputies keep watch on a group of people arrested after a store on Martin Luther King Boulevard was looted.

■ Unrest: Troops begin deployment and a dusk-to-dawn curfew is clamped into place in the second day of violence.

By GREG BRAXTON
and JIM NEWTON
TIMES STAFF WRITERS

Thousands of looters ransacked stores and set fires Thursday in a chaotic rampage through the Los Angeles area as National Guard troops moved into the streets and a dusk-to-dawn curfew was clamped into force in numerous cities.

With the violence showing no signs of abating, Gov. Pete Wilson and Mayor Tom Bradley announced just before midnight that they have requested additional National Guard troops for a total of 6,000 in Los Angeles County. They said they have also asked federal authorities to place U.S. military forces on "standby alert" should greater troop strength become necessary.

"We are determined," Wilson said, "that this city is not going to suffer the kind of terrorizing that some people seem bent on inflicting upon it."

Triggered by Wednesday's not guilty verdicts of four Los Angeles police officers charged with beating black motorist Rodney G. King, the second day of mushrooming violence pushed the death toll to

Fig. 15: This was the front-page headline and photo used by the Los Angeles Times for one of their issues during the riots (Braxton and Newton, 1992). The photo exhibits how the riots were evocative of slavery, rows of African-Americans laying face-down with their hands bound, overseen by authority figures. Despite the riots being an outlet for the frustrations of racial inequality, these images were used to perpetuate the connections between African-Americans and criminality.

[Hook]

Fight the power

We've got to fight the powers that be

Fig. 16: In accordance with Guerrero's claim, the Public Enemy song, *Fight the Power* (1989), was created for Spike Lee's film, *Do the Right Thing* (1989). The song's core message is grounded in a black nationalist sentiment, to 'fight the power' is to defiantly oppose a perceived abuse of power by white institutions.



Fig. 17: In the police interview, each man is scrutinised and harassed in one way or another. Pictured is Raheem, who is emotionally and physically abused by the interrogators. This form of getting a confession is not dissimilar to the Central Park jogger case, where the 'Central Park Five' gave false confessions as a result of police coercion.



Fig. 18: Acting as the manager of the DJ competition, Latifah nods along to Q's audition tape, which provides a meta sense of validity to Q's ability as a DJ.



Fig. 19: *Little Caesar* characterises the rise and fall of the eponymous gangster, and many other gangster films of the time. His rise to the top is temporary, his death inevitable. Like the hood films, these depictions were tied to prominent socio-economic issues at the time, namely the Great Depression during this cycle.



Fig. 20: *G-Men* was debatably the result of the industry's backlash against the celebration of gangsters which occurred in the first phase of gangster films in the 1930s. While the iconography was similar, from the outfits to the fast-talking, Cagney's role change from gangster to federal agent could be read as an industrial disapproval of the earlier gangster films.



Fig. 21: Bishop idolises Cody Jarrett from *White Heat*, quoting his lines as they are spoken. The parallels between the 1930s and 1940s gangster films and the hood sub-genre is exemplified by scenes like this which openly acknowledge the relation between the two eras. The film develops this relationship by changing some of the conventions to suit the contemporary context, such as the gangster's death.



Fig. 22: Sheryl's brief appearance in the film is wholly negative, she is depicted as a drug addict willing to perform sexual acts to feed her addiction. She is dishevelled and does not care about her baby or the danger it has encountered.



Fig. 23: Pam Grier was a successful star of the Blaxploitation era, her screen persona was grounded in unashamed sexuality and physical strength. Her characters often fought against the criminals who plague black neighbourhoods, such as in *Coffy* (pictured), where she takes on a local drug syndicate.



Fig. 24: In *Super Fly*, the anti-hero has several relationships with women, and the film does not spend any time with his love interest apart from during their sex scenes. He is also portrayed as promiscuous and the film does not demonise this behaviour.



Fig. 25: In *Cleopatra Jones*, the story is set across the world. In the opening, Jones oversees the destruction of an opium poppy field in Turkey, cutting off the drug supply which plagues America at its source. It is rare for these films to have the scale which this does, it is akin to the *James Bond* franchise.



Fig. 26: This early scene in the film foreshadows Tisean's inability to afford a babysitter. She has brought her child to this party because of economic issues. This scene also introduces the women at a 1970s-themed party, perhaps recalling the blaxploitation heroines.



Fig. 27: Nate's friendly exterior disappears once he is able to exploit Stony's financial troubles. He is uncaring to her circumstances and will only provide her with the aid she needs if she satisfies his sexual needs.



Fig. 28: The scene itself illustrates Stony's discomfort, she is holding back tears and cannot look at Nate. The camera lingers on her in a close-up to reinforce how uncomfortable this encounter is for Stony.



Fig. 29: After leaving Nate's house, a long shot of her walking away reminds the audience of the post-industrial environment in which the film takes place. The women reminisce about the past when these factories were functioning and paying workers sufficient wages. Economic inadequacies are foregrounded throughout the film through either dialogue or in shots like this.



Fig. 30: This scene illustrates the difference between the siblings. Stony wants Stevie to have a better life and is delighted to be able to provide that for him after having to make sacrifices, such as submitting to Nate's demands. Stevie however is content in remaining in the hood, his chance at escape with UCLA was simply a lie.



Fig. 31: The sign, used in both *Scarface* films, seduces Tony and convinces him to follow his criminal ambitions. It also provides a warning for the consequences of being seduced by its message. The American dream will not provide Tony with long-term success, as the rise-and-fall structure indicates his success will be brief.



Fig. 32: A close-up of a glass mosaic globe being shattered by gunfire appears during the botched bank robbery. This is reminiscent of the 'World is Yours' motif from the *Scarface* films, thus reinforcing the motif's message regarding the fallibility of the American dream.



Fig. 33: The women gather around a roundtable during their mock impressions of Italian-Americans, specifically referencing *The Godfather*. The backdrop behind Frankie recalls the notion of the world being at the disposal of the gangsters at the top. This parody of *The Godfather* creates a contrast between the gangsters from that franchise and this film, reminding the audience of the context of this film.



Fig. 34: *Set It Off* parodies *The Godfather* through drawing attention to the differences between the mise-en-scène of the films. Whereas the women in *Set It Off* are cleaners who are pretending to be crime bosses during their amateur crime streak, the criminals of *The Godfather* are immaculately dressed and rely on traditions of family and honour. The parodying highlights the distinct differences between the gangsters of the two films.



Fig. 35: The film is acutely aware of hip-hop culture and the casting of Queen Latifah, as evident in the scenes of Cleo shuffling through the CD collections of cars which she breaks into, trying to find a hip-hop CD. Not only does this relate to Latifah and the importance of hip-hop to this sub-genre, but it could also be read as a reference to the director's past of making rap music videos.



Fig. 36: The final shot of *Thelma and Louise* keeps the women in a bittersweet limbo, their fight against patriarchal forces remains open-ended.



Fig. 37: Like *Thelma and Louise*, the ending of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* places the heroes in a bittersweet limbo, not allowing the audience to see their presumably inevitable deaths. They go out in a blaze of glory, maintaining their legendary status.

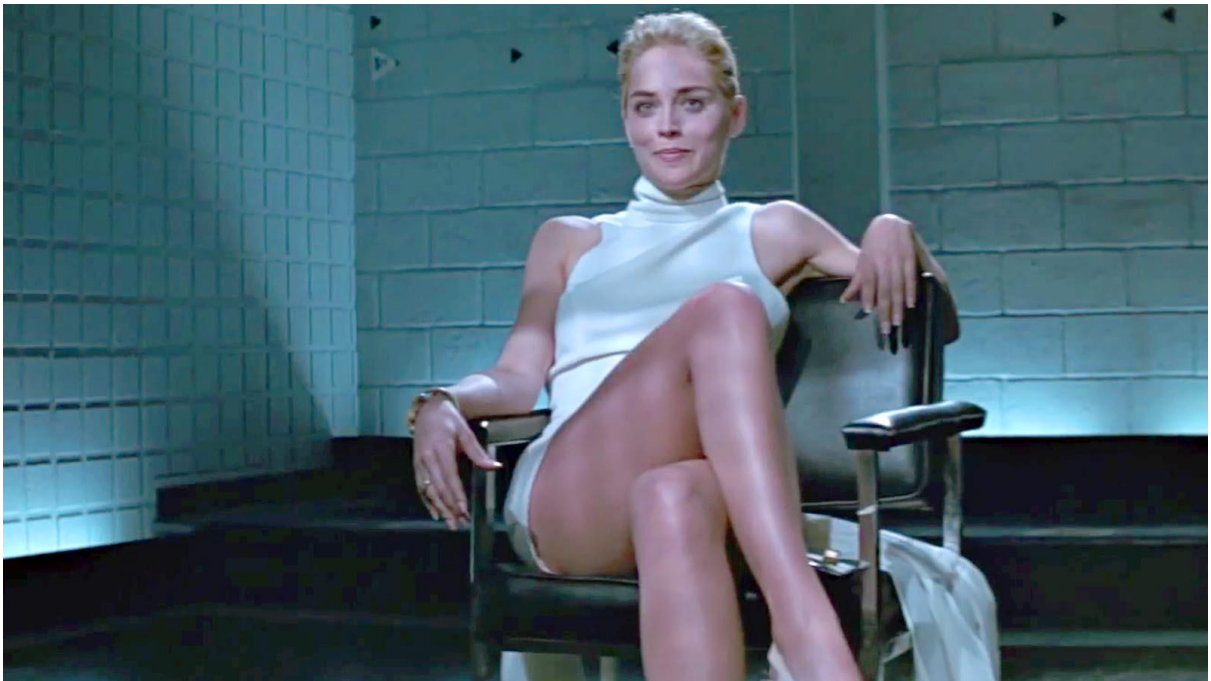


Fig. 38: This scene in *Basic Instinct* places the characters and audiences as voyeurs of Tramell. She controls the gaze of the characters and weaponises her sexuality like this throughout the film.

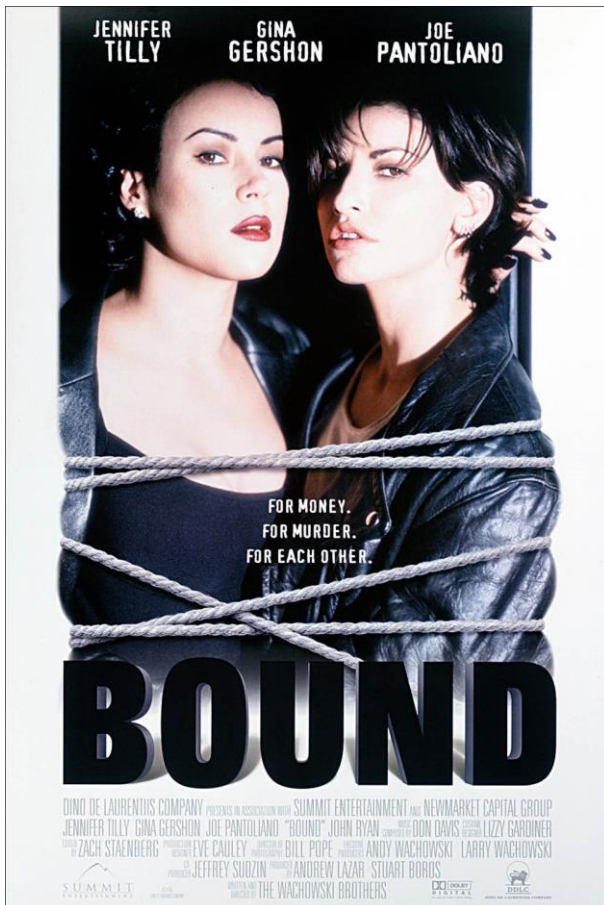


Fig. 39: As Benschhoff and Griffin claim, this poster can be read as adhering to male fantasies regarding female sexuality. The pair are fetishized with rope as a signifier of bondage, their lips are slightly parted, and their closeness connotes an intimacy between them.



Fig. 40: Cleo uses two guns proficiently at the firing range while the other women are learning to use one. This is one of several situations where Cleo incorporates the hypermasculine traits found in the sub-genre which are largely missing in the film.



Fig. 41: Cleo's moll, Ursula, is silent but incredibly loyal to Cleo. She is both sexualised and objectified through her silent submission to Cleo.



Fig. 42: Cleo is intimidated by an acquaintance who laughs at her car while flaunting his own. This acquaintance is played by the director, perhaps connoting him doing his part in enabling Cleo to reinforce the sub-genre's masculine stereotypes. Her insecurity about her car being an inadequate marker of her status leads her to purchase a new lowrider after their first robbery.



Fig. 43: Ursula performs a teasing sexual act on top of Cleo's new car for her. With this new car, Cleo can now enjoy the masculine spoils of her criminality. The fascination with her car reinforces McArthur's claim regarding the significance of the car as a marker of a gangster's success (1972, 30).



Fig. 44: Despite the solidarity between the women, Cleo's lesbianism is not necessarily accepted by the others. When they walk in on an intimate scene between Cleo and Ursula, their expressions do not connote acceptance. Stony's eyes are averted and Tisean looks confused.



Fig. 45: Cleo's bullet-ridden car parallels the violent ending of *Bonnie and Clyde*, another film about outlaws who are punished by law enforcement for their transgressions.



Fig. 46: This shot highlights the difference (in race, gender and size) of Cleo's body compared to those commonly seen in film. Her death can be read as a punishment for her transgressions against heterosexual norms, it also adheres to Warshaw's rise-and-fall structure.



Fig. 47: Ace's mother watches Calvin while he counts his money at the table. Instead of looking at him to thank him, she looks down at the meal she is serving. This can be read as her feeling shame, as she cannot afford to decline Calvin's offer.



Fig. 48: Calvin has no shame in flashing his money so openly in front of those struggling. He relies on wealth as a marker of his success. His early scenes are the film's first examples of engaging with the notion of material success as a form of self-expression.



Fig. 49: Mitch conducts his work in a 'quotidian environment' (Neale, 2002, 37-38), he usually either checks in on his dealers or drops off packages in his neighbourhood. Cutting between Mitch's business and Ace's work at the laundromat reinforces the quotidian nature of his work.



Fig. 50: Mitch drives his new car through the neighbourhood in a montage sequence which cuts between his and Ace's joy riding around, to the community reacting with enthusiasm upon seeing his car. Like *Set It Off*, this scene reinforces the continuing power of cars as denoting success for a gangster.



Fig. 51: Mitch's time in the club exemplifies Majors and Billson's cool pose concept. He greets everyone and owns the spotlight with swagger. Everyone notices him and all those in his vicinity approach him.



Fig. 52: The scene of Mitch undressing highlights how his persona is a performance. His undressing is ritualistic, he carefully unpacks each item of jewellery and carefully places them on his bedside table. This recalls the concept of cool pose through how carefully he constructs his appearance.



Fig. 53: The scene's silent ambience draws attention to Mitch's stare at the doorway which adopts a bar-like shadow. This shadow can be read as prison cell bars, the close-up of them highlights their significance in the scene. Seemingly only when Mitch is vulnerable (without his constructed appearance) does he contemplate the tangible risk of his career.



Fig. 54: Once more, Mitch's business is shown to be conducted in a dingy area. In a rare show of aggression, Mitch is frustrated with one of his dealers who was robbed and could not stop it. Mitch's frustration relates to the hypermasculine traits found in the sub-genre, he is frustrated at his dealer's inability to defend himself using violence.



Fig. 55: Another display of hypermasculinity is Mitch's brief insecurity over his partner's sexual fidelity. His question has an accusatory undertone, he is insecure about whether she has remained faithful to him during his time in prison.



Fig. 56: Mitch and Ace stand on opposite sides of the court's fence, symbolising the differences between them. Mitch's concern for his appearance leads him to reject Ace's invitation to a game, whereas Ace does not have the same self-presentation concerns. This shot conveys Mitch's careful presentation alongside his new motorbike (which impresses the local children) whereas Ace on the other side of the fence is dressed casually playing basketball with Mitch's brother.



Fig. 57: In keeping with conventional representation, their mother is an absent figure. She is never shown looking after Sonny, she is either absent or seen here, sleeping while Ice is in a seemingly drug-addled daze.



Fig. 58: Mitch takes care of Sonny, and this scene conveys how his care reinforces the importance of adequate personal expression. Mitch's personal desire for a stylish appearance is something he is passing down to Sonny.



Fig. 59: In the most emotional scene for Mitch, he cries thinking about the perilous situation Sonny is in. The use of the long-take close-up in this scene allows for Mitch's mask to slip and reveal his sadness and then murderous anger.

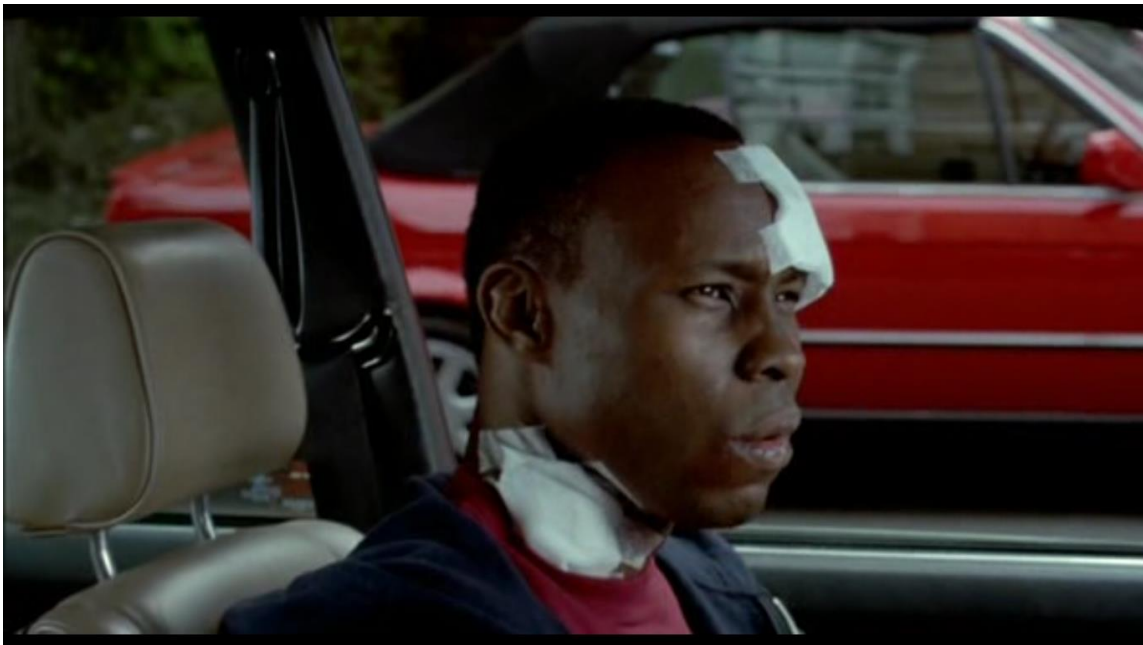


Fig. 60: The backdrop in Ace's shots is noticeably different to Mitch's. The shot also highlights Ace's injuries, perhaps as a reminder of the consequences of the violence that Mitch talks about committing.



Fig. 61: This shot of Ace's dazed expression is followed by a shot from his perspective, looking out of the store window onto the road outside. The street is lively, a car passes by, people are walking along the street and two men are hanging around a car. This connotes a longing to escape the boredom of his employment and join the lively outside world. This is somewhat confirmed by the difference between his energy in this scene compared to when delivers laundry around the neighbourhood.



Fig. 62: In communicating how wealthy the characters are, they bet thousands of dollars over whether Mitch can throw his rubbish across the room and into a bin. This transaction is completed immediately as they hand over the money bound in elastic bands.



Fig. 63: The illusion of money falling from the skies symbolises the temptation which faces hustlers like Ace. However, his critical condition at the time of seeing this illusion reinforces the dangers of this temptation, which links to the rise-and-fall structure.



Fig. 64: The earlier scene of Mitch walking through the club (See Fig. 51) is recalled in this sequence as Ace does not share Mitch's comfort. This montage is reliant on quick cuts and close-ups to display Ace's discomfort in this environment. The contrast between the earlier scene with Mitch reinforces Ace's difference as the leading gangster figure.



Fig. 65: Like the club scenes, another scene between Ace and Mitch is returned to. Like the club scenes, this return to the two cruising around the neighbourhood alludes to the differences between them. It is significant that Ace should wait for Mitch to be released from prison before cruising as it signifies his desire to put Mitch in the spotlight rather than himself.



Fig. 66: After successfully exerting his dominance over Cakes and Ace's mother, Calvin flashes his money at Ace to prove how money brings him power. He smugly shows off in front of the family, he is seemingly uncaring about the rudeness this causes because he knows the power of his wealth.



Fig. 67: While Ace was dealing with Calvin's concerns, Rico emerges to stir conflict. Despite Ace being his boss and telling him to back down, Rico continues to antagonise Calvin. It is Rico's unrelenting aggression in this situation which leads Calvin to leave, causing the relationship between Calvin and Ace to be irreparably broken.



Fig. 68: Rico happily adheres to sub-genre stereotypes, he is loud, aggressive and openly thuggish. While Ace condemns his behaviour, Rico revels in the attention he receives and the power he has from wielding guns.



Fig. 69: Rico proudly plays his own sex tape in the club for everyone to see. This tape affirms several stereotypes which Rico adheres to. He is displaying his sexual prowess, he is wearing his gold chain and drinking champagne during sex.



Fig. 70: Rico enjoys being a spectacle, he enjoys the attention and comments on his own performance. He disobeys Ace when he is warned about the attention he brings to himself. Whereas Ace avoids drawing attention to himself, Rico wants to be seen.



Fig. 71: Rico's villainous turn occurs when he betrays and murders Mitch (and Sonny as an indirect result of this). His hypermasculinity (specifically his greed and constant resorting to violence) leads to his downfall.



Fig. 72: This scene disrupts the film's diegesis as it can be read in multiple ways. It could be a way of distinguishing between fiction and Mitch's harsh reality. Following the suburban voyeurism discussed in Chapter One, it could also be read as a comment on how audiences gleefully consume violence in the hood.



Fig. 73: In *New Jack City*, they are also enthusiastically watching De Palma's *Scarface*, however it is projected in a home cinema. Nino gets in front of the screen, symbolically becoming part of the film, and he declares "the world is mine". By doing this, he is affirming his own place as a credible gangster.



Fig. 74: A close-up on this mug highlights its intertextual intention. Once Ace's career is violently disrupted and the narrative transitions into the 'fall', the recalling of *Scarface's* motif is an explicit reminder of the dangers of being enticed by criminality.



Fig. 75: The fountain which bears the phrase 'The World is Yours' is Tony's place of death. The film's final shot moves across the room, passing the statue in a close-up, bringing attention to the cruelty of its allure. For Tony, it symbolised the potential of the American dream, but at the end it comes to function as a punishment for succeeding in his criminal aspirations.

[Hook 2×]

"You gotta make the money first"

"Then when you get the money, you get the power"

"Then when you get the power, Then you get the woman"

Fig. 76: The chorus for Ice-T's *Money, Power & Women* (2000) samples Tony's speech from De Palma's remake. This is one example of how prominent hip-hop artists have been inspired by the film in various ways, here very explicitly.

[Verse 3]

People wanna know how come

I got a gat and I'm lookin out the window like Malcolm

Ready to bring that noise

Kinda trigger happy like the Geto Boys

April 29th brought power to the people

And we might just see a sequel

Cause police got equal hate

A chazzer's a pig that don't fly straight

Fig. 77: This verse from *Wicked* (1992) is about Ice Cube arming himself, preparing for a riot like the April 29th one where the policemen who assaulted Rodney King were acquitted. The final line reworks a quote from *Scarface* (1983) to become a threat to police officers.



Fig. 78: When Mitch is explicitly confronted over his culpability in the drugs crisis, he reacts violently and rejects the message. He consistently ignores this problem throughout the film and is finally killed because he is in possession of drugs.



Fig. 79: The scene is meant to look real, like a modern version of how the 'stage' was vibrant in the 1980s. It is revealed as a construct of the kind of life that Ace and Mitch were prominent members of. This construction taps into the issues surrounding credibility and authenticity.



Fig. 80: The video for Young Jeezy's song recreates the film's plot in its four-minute runtime, sometimes recreating shots from the film including this photoshoot section, which even features Cam'ron in a cameo role playing Rico (while Jeezy plays Ace). Jeezy is potentially recreating this narrative to provide himself with a sense of credibility and align himself with Ace, who can see through those pretending to live this kind of life.



Fig. 81: The handheld style and limited cutting conveys a sense of realism, therefore building the film's sense of authenticity prior to the reveal that it is based on a true story.



Fig. 82: The abrupt, off-screen, death of Lulu helps to build a sense of realism for the film. His death is not explained or a spectacle which furthers the abrupt sense of peril which was introduced in the opening sequence.



Fig. 83: The match-cut from Ace to his newborn child potentially signifies the cyclical nature of violence in the hood or that he has something to live for. As he lays in critical condition, there is new life to potentially take his place.

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