

# Habitus of the Hood

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## **Chapter 12**

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The Hood is Where the Heart is: Melodrama, Habitus, and the Hood Film

Andrew deWaard

A fucked up childhood is why the way I am;  
It's got me in the state where I don't give a damn.  
Somebody help me, but nah they don't hear me though,  
I guess I'll be another victim of the ghetto.

MC Eiht (of Compton's Most Wanted and  
*Menace II Society*), "Streih Up Menace"

Rarely does such a consistent and self-contained collection of representational material offer itself unto analysis like the short-lived hood film cycle of the early 1990s. Rarer still is the foundational structure of such a symbolic collection completely overlooked by its critics. Quickly gaining notoriety as a result of the vast media attention they garnered from unexpected financial success and headline-grabbing violence at some theatrical exhibitions, not to mention its sociopolitical context,<sup>1</sup> the hood film disappeared almost as quickly as it appeared, marking the first major wave of African-American film production in nearly twenty years. "Production in 1990 and 1991 alone," according to Guerrero (1993), "easily surpassed the total production of all black-focused films released since the retreat of the Blaxploitation wave in the mid-1970s" (p. 155). *Boyz N the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991) and *Menace II Society* (Allen and Albert Hughes, 1993) are the hood film cycle's most renowned and successful films, as well as its most representative. Spike Lee, while often transcending the confines of the hood film genre, is a significant figure in the development of African-American filmmaking at this time, and his classic *Do the Right Thing* (1989) can be seen as the hood film's precursor, while *Clockers* (1995) marks its end by self-consciously examining the genre's conventions.<sup>2</sup> Other examples of the hood film include *New Jack City* (Mario Van Peebles, 1991), *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (Matty Rich, 1991), *Juice* (Ernest Dickerson, 1992), *Just Another Girl on the IRT* (Leslie Harris, 1992), *Deep Cover* (Bill Duke, 1992) and "over twenty similarly packaged feature-length films between 1991 and 1995" (Watkins, 1998, p. 172).

These hood films are all united, for the most part, by largely African-American creative talent, contemporary urban settings (primarily black communities in Los Angeles or New York), a strong intermedial connection to youth rap/hip-hop culture (via soundtrack and "rappers-turned-actors"), particularly the subgenre of "gangsta" rap, and a thematic focus on inner-city social and political issues such as poverty, crime, racism, drugs and violence. Consequently, film critics and scholars were quick to explore and interpret this uniquely confined set of films, collecting them under a variety of labels other than just *the hood film* moniker: "male-focused, 'ghettocentric,' action-crime-adventure" films (Guerrero, 1993,

p. 182), “the new Black realism films” (Diawara, 1993, p. 24), *New Jack Cinema* (Kendall, 1994), “trendy ‘gangsta rap’ films” (Reid, 1995, p. 457), “black action films” (Chan, 1998, p. 35), and, in what would be the most accurate description had he included the prefix *melo*, Spike Lee himself disparagingly called the cycle “hiphop, urban drama, ghetto film” (as quoted in Setlowe, 1993, p. 12). The gangster, action, and crime genres are continually mentioned as influences, as they clearly are; even film noir is suggested occasionally. However, in all of these considerations of genre and classification, the word *melodrama* rarely appears; if it does, it is in its typical, derogatory usage and does not warrant discussion.<sup>34</sup> This is a detrimental oversight: the hood film’s fundamental core, I argue in this chapter, is the melodramatic mode, centered around the experience of being “another victim of the ghetto.”

In Bourdieu’s (1984) terms, mapping this cycle of films and their hitherto undiscovered melodramatic underpinnings reveals that the hood film cycle not only embodies and expresses a particular class habitus – “the internalized form of class condition and of the conditioning it entails” (p. 101) – but (melo)dramatizes the very production of this habitus, particularly with its primary focus on coming-of-age story lines and a youth audience. The interaction *with* and representation *by* various forms of media is also crucial in this structuring of habitus – what James Baldwin (1968) calls the black artist’s unavoidable “burden of representation” – as is the “dialogue” that occurs between the films as the hood genre progresses.<sup>5</sup> Beginning in early childhood, the habitus, according to Bourdieu (1977), is the product of a long process of inculcation, resulting in “systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*” (p. 72) that shape particular lifestyles. For young, black, male residents of the hood – whose life-style is the subject of much debate as well as consumer exploitation – this habitus is conditioned by its existence within a specific urban space rife with crime, poverty, violence, and drugs. In this sense, these hood films are all about habitus, and as we shall see, this habitus is structured *by*, and *through* melodrama.

The realization of such a melodramatic habitus will unfold in two parts: mapping the melodramatic mode onto a previously unconsidered genre – the hood film cycle of the early 1990s, the *melo-ghetto* – and then analyzing the significance of what amounts to be the melodrama of the map. Plotting the melodramatic mode onto such a disparate and seemingly incompatible genre such as the hood film should explicate the geography of the melodramatic mode, showcasing its fundamental characteristics and concerns. Witnessing its application in such a violent and “masculine” genre as the hood film should also demonstrate the versatility of the melodramatic mode. Following this structural task, this new melodramatic incarnation will be explored in terms of its evolution of the melodramatic mode, demonstrating the ways in which melodrama is continuously reinvented and redefined. With the hood film, a key shift occurs: the home – a crucial concern in melodrama – becomes the hood, and it requires abandonment. Intimately connected to this disfigured sense of space is another, often overlooked concern of melodrama: the *melos*. Music in the hood film is of central importance in mediating the spatial and temporal logic of the hood. With the hood film, melodrama is put in the service of a far more serious concern than its traditional domestic or soap-opera utilization: the sociopolitical crisis of the African-American urban community.

### The geography of melodrama: pathos n the hood

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Express yourself, from the heart  
Cause if you wanna start to move up the chart,  
Then expression is a big part.

Dr. Dre (of N.W.A. and *Juice*), "Express Yourself"

Recuperating the term melodrama within the field of film studies has become quite the melodramatic project unto itself. Scorned and disdained, this 'suffering victim' has been the object of much derision, particularly in its latest incarnation in popular American mass culture. Vulgar, naïve, sensational, feminine, sentimental, excessive, overly emotional<sup>6</sup> – these are but a few of the disparaging descriptions that have 'robbed' melodrama of its 'virtue' and prevented any academic consideration of its continuing contemporary significance. However, in true melodramatic form, its virtue has been restored in recent years with 'heightened' and 'sensational' gestures by such 'noble heroes' as Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. Not content with simply defending its honor, Williams (1998) claims that "Melodrama is the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures" (p. 42), and "should be viewed ... as what most typifies popular American narrative in literature, stage, film and television" (Williams, 2001, p. 11). But like any good melodrama worth its weight in tear-soaked hankies, the melodrama of melodrama's recuperation does not have a clear-cut happy ending – there is still much work to be done.

Drawing heavily from Peter Brooks' seminal 1976 book, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, the work of Gledhill and Williams opens up a new avenue for the study of cinematic melodrama. Rather than its typical, albeit contentious configuration as a genre, melodrama can also be viewed as a mode: melodrama's "aesthetic, cultural, and ideological features [have] coalesce[d] into a modality which organizes the disparate sensory phenomena, experiences, and contradictions of a newly emerging secular and atomizing society in visceral, affective and morally explanatory terms" (Gledhill, 2000, p. 228). If melodrama is to be understood as continually evolving, "adaptable across a range of genres, across decades, and across national cultures" (p. 229), then its progress needs to be consistently charted, its latest forms constantly delineated. Unfortunately, much of the scholarship concerning melodrama is still preoccupied with either reclaiming past works, rarely moving beyond the classical Hollywood era, or focused on specific auteurs, from D.W. Griffith to Douglas Sirk to contemporary directors such as Pedro Almodóvar and Todd Haynes. As "a tremendously protean, evolving, and modernizing form that continually uncovers new realistic material for its melodramatic project" (Williams, 2001, p. 297), melodrama's dominance as a fundamental mode will only be widely received and accepted after significant scholarship that considers its various contemporary forms.

Considered by Williams (1998) to be "perhaps the most important single work contributing to the rehabilitation of the term *melodrama* as a cultural form" (p. 51), Brooks'

*The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976) traces the historical origins of the form, applies his findings to the work of Balzac and Henry James, and establishes melodrama as a significant modern mode in the process. Situated as a response to the post-Enlightenment world that arose out of the French Revolution, “melodrama becomes the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred universe” (Brooks, 1976, p. 15). With the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics thrown into question, melodrama was to express what Brooks calls the “moral occult, the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality” (p. 5).

Brooks’ isolated concern with the nineteenth-century realist novel, particularly Balzac and James, proves to be both an asset and a hindrance to the theory of melodrama. Brooks is able to earnestly re-evaluate the form without the trappings of ideological condescension, allowing him to highlight its core characteristics, but he does not trace its importance in popular culture, where it has continued to evolve. Considering its modern reinvention, Gledhill and Williams break with Brooks in his view of melodrama as being in opposition to realism and as a mode of ‘excess.’ In Gledhill’s (1987) consideration, contemporary forms of melodrama are firmly grounded in realism: “Taking its stand in the material world of everyday reality and lived experience, and acknowledging the limitations of the conventions of language and representation, it proceeds to force into aesthetic presence identity, value and plenitude of meaning” (p. 33). Williams (1998) goes a step further, suggesting that the term “excess” be eliminated from melodramatic discourse all together: “The supposed excess is much more often the mainstream, though it is often not acknowledged as such because melodrama consistently decks itself out in the trappings of realism and the modern (and now, the postmodern)” (p. 58). As melodrama has developed, it has cloaked itself in “realism” but remained fundamentally concerned with revealing moral legibility.

For all her rhetoric concerning melodrama being the primary mode of contemporary American mass culture, Williams’ examples do not quite do her thesis justice. “Melodrama Revised” focuses on D. W. Griffith’s *Way Down East* (1920), only briefly contemplating *Schindler’s List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) and *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993), as well as some select Vietnam films, while *Playing the Race Card* only goes as far as the *Roots* miniseries (Alex Haley, 1977), moving to “cultural event” with the Rodney King and O. J. Simpson trials as her most contemporary consideration. The hood film shall prove a convincing illustration of contemporary melodrama that grounds itself in urban ‘realism.’ Using Williams’ five-point systematic breakdown of the melodramatic mode, we can structurally outline the melodramatic hood film:

1. “Melodrama begins, and wants to end,” according to Williams (1998), “in a space of innocence” (p. 65), usually represented by the iconic image of the home. Immediately, the hood film puts a spin on this most central of melodramatic concerns, adhering and deviating from the convention. As will be considered in more depth in the second part of this essay, the home has become the community at large – the hood – and it is portrayed

as an area of crisis, not a space of innocence. However, a recurring motif that transpires in all hood films *does* express the innocence and virtue from which melodrama typically originates: the juxtaposition of children against the rough backdrop of the hood. Spike Lee, for example, often celebrates his Brooklyn community with loving tributes to the way children manage to generate fun out of minimal resources and confined spaces, such as the jubilant respite-from-the-heat fire hydrant scene in *Do the Right Thing*, and the opening montage of various street activities – jump rope, hopscotch, foot races, street baseball, etc. – in *Crooklyn*.

Many hood films take the form of coming-of-age tales, charting a path of lost innocence as the corrupting influence of the hood takes its toll on the film's young protagonists. *Clockers* begins with a montage of children witnessing grisly murder scenes in their neighborhood, and a central conflict is the protagonist's relationship with a younger boy from his building, Shorty, who idolizes Strike and is inevitably drawn into the cycle of violence. *Straight Out of Brooklyn* follows three teenagers navigating the treacheries of the hood, to varying degrees of success; *Juice* follows four, and also features a scene of the main protagonist attempting to dissuade his younger brother from venerating violence. Both *Boyz* and *Menace II Society* track children growing up across many years in the hood; in the former, "Singleton explores at least three ideological paths for young black men, as represented in the dispositions and fates of his three principal *Boyz*" (Guerrero, 1993, p. 184). Both films also feature extended introductory scenes of the trauma faced by prepubescent inhabitants of the hood. *Boyz* begins with four schoolchildren walking down a dilapidated, garbage-laden street, discussing their homework in the same breath as the previous night's shooting. Exploring a crime scene, one child is rebuked for not recognizing bullet holes; she responds by proclaiming that at least she knows her "times-tables." The subsequent shot is a slow pan across a classroom wall, displaying the children's endearingly simplistic art depicting police cars, helicopters conducting surveillance, and family members in coffins – a striking juxtaposition of innocence and affliction.

2. "Melodrama focuses on victim-heroes and the recognition of their virtue" (Williams, 1998, p. 66). The hood film's usage of victim-heroes is comparable to Thomas Elsaesser's (1987) position on 1950s family melodrama: these films "present *all* the characters convincingly as victims" (p. 86). Characters in hood films are (nearly) all compelling victims because of the dire depiction of their surroundings. Poverty, crime, drugs, racism, and violence – everyone is a victim. Even disagreeable characters are viewed as victims on account of this situation. *Boyz's* Doughboy (Ice Cube), for instance, is a violent, misogynistic drug dealer, but he attains sympathy on account of the troubled relationship he has with his mother, a single mom struggling to provide for her two sons, privileging the athletically skilled one over the other. Doughboy is also given the film's key piece of dialogue in its concluding scene, both incendiary critique and induction of pathos: "Either they don't know, or don't show, or don't care about what's going on in the hood." As victims of the hood, suffering is felt by one and all.



Emotionalism is key in recognizing the virtue of the victim-hero, and it is highly visible in the hood film, despite its rough exterior of tough language, gritty violence, and unrelenting hostility. In *Boyz*, for instance, following an unjust encounter with the police, Tre (Cuba Gooding Jr.) returns to his girlfriend Brandi's (Nia Long) house and proceeds to have an emotional breakdown. Swinging his fists wildly in the air before falling into Brandi's arms, Tre acts out his frustration and demonstrates his vulnerability, "a pivotal moment" according to Michael Eric Dyson (1992), "in the development of a politics of alternative black masculinity that prizes the strength of surrender and cherishes the embrace of a healing tenderness" (p. 135). *New Jack City*, perhaps the cycle's most simplistically violent and one-dimensional film, still has its gangster villain sharing tears with his brother (even if it ends in his murder), as well as a textbook melodramatic montage portraying the victims of drug addiction – "I have a crack baby. He was born blind" – and the trials of rehabilitation, set to a mournful piano score.

In hood films that primarily revolve around one central protagonist – Tre in *Boyz*, Caine (Tyron Turner) in *Menace*, Mookie (Spike Lee) in *Do the Right Thing*, Strike (Mekhi Phifer) in *Clockers* – the victim-hero is always torn between allegiances to his fellow victims in the hood and the opportunity for upward mobility. As "the key function of victimization is to orchestrate the moral legibility crucial to the mode" (Williams 1998, p. 66), the victim-hero of the hood film always has his or her virtue recognized in the conclusion of the film as testament to the conditions of the hood. Whether by refusing to participate in the cycle of black-on-black violence and pursuing a college education (*Boyz*), shielding a child from a drive-by shooting (*Menace*), or inciting a riot in response to a savage murder by a police officer (*Do the Right Thing*),<sup>7</sup> the victim-hero makes a moral stand in opposition to the injustice perpetrated against the hood.

3. "Melodrama appears modern by borrowing from realism, but realism serves the melodramatic passion and action" (Williams, 1998, p. 67). While conventional wisdom posits melodrama as a crude, retrograde form out of which a more modern 'realism' developed, upon considering contemporary melodrama it becomes clear that realism is in fact at the service of the traditional melodramatic mode, albeit in a disguised, modernized fashion. The second part of this essay will explore the way the hood film is rooted in a realist portrayal of a specific spatial and temporal existence, but at this point, we can briefly look at the introduction of *Menace* as an example of the way realism is used in the service of melodrama in the hood film.

Explicit in its foregrounding the narrative amidst a history of racial violence, *Menace* uses pixelated archival footage of the 1965 Watts riots immediately following its opening scene. This imagery would most certainly have resonated with audiences at the time, as the Los Angeles riots that occurred in response to the acquittal of Rodney King's assailants happened the previous year. Our introduction to the current state of Watts is perceived in a bird's-eye view long shot, "in an almost ethnographic manner, with an invasive camera looking down on and documenting the neighborhood" (Massood, 2003, p. 165). A testament to the film's tagline, "this is the truth, this is what's real," *Menace*

is quick to establish its “realistic” backdrop before delving into its otherwise typically melodramatic portrayal of a victim-hero’s eventual recognition of virtue.

4. “Melodrama involves a dialectic of pathos and action – a give and take of ‘too late’ and ‘in the nick of time’” (Williams, 1998, p. 69). Williams makes a key insight into the melodramatic mode when she connects pathos to action, permitting the most seemingly *unmelodramatic* of films to be viewed in a new light. In its elucidation of a character’s virtue in the climax, melodrama tends to end in one of two ways: “either it can consist of a paroxysm of pathos ... or it can take that paroxysm and channel it into the more virile and action-centered variants of rescue, chase, and fight (as in the western and all the action genres)” (p. 58). *Boyz* provides a tremendous example of this transition between pathos and action, complete with all the requisite ingredients: the virtuous ‘good son,’ Ricky (Morris Chestnut) is mistakenly caught up in a turf war, and Tre’s warning calls are ‘too late’ to save him from a drive-by shooting, as is Doughboy’s rescue attempt. The chase and fight to revenge this innocent’s death is triggered, while the pathos is increased by the letter indicating Ricky’s successful completion of the SATs – his ticket out of the hood – waiting in the mail all the while.

Paradoxically, Albert and Allen Hughes claim that the impetus for creating *Menace* was being “outraged by the Hollywood sentimentality” (Taubin, 1993, p. 17) of *Boyz*; it was their self-imposed mission to capture what they considered was the ‘real’ situation in the hood. Upon consideration of its similar use of the melodramatic mode, however, there is very little difference between the ‘sentimental’ climaxes of each film. True, Caine dies in *Menace*, as opposed to Tre’s escape to college in *Boyz*, but the recognition of virtue in a dialectic of pathos and action is equally as strong in the climax of *Menace*, perhaps even more so: by threatening the death of an innocent child, and melodramatically delaying the outcome, the Hughes Brothers are even more ‘guilty’ of “Hollywood sentimentality.” Like Ricky’s death in *Boyz*, the climax of *Menace* plays on the qualities of “too late” and “in the nick of time.” Crosscutting between the final stages of Caine and Ronnie’s (Jada Pinkett) packing up of their lives – mere minutes from escaping the hood – and the oncoming evil in the form of a drive-by shooting, the scene is an example of melodramatic temporal and rhythmic relations: “we are moved in both directions at once in a contradictory hurry-up and slowdown” (Williams, 1998, p. 73). The car approaches in slow motion, its gang members brandishing their weapons, while Caine and his friends unknowingly laugh and fraternize in real-time. The action feels fast, but the duration of the event is actually slowed down and deferred, and the outcome of whether or not the child is killed is also delayed. Evoking the melodramatic motif of tableaux, a final montage of images from Caine’s life in the hood – violence, laughter, teaching a child, a police arrest, a tear in prison, a tender kiss – are intercut with quick fades to black, Caine’s redemptive voice-over, and the sound of his slowly fading heartbeat. Punctuated by a final jarring gunshot, this scene of intense action and violence is directly in the service of procuring pathos for its virtuous victim-hero.

5. "Melodrama presents characters who embody primary psychic roles organized in Manichaeian conflicts between good and evil" (Williams, 1998, p. 77). The most derided characteristic of melodrama, the lack of complex psychological depth common to melodrama is a potentially objectionable quality, but there is no denying its prevalence in mass culture. Reductive vilification of perceived evil is frequent and widespread, often in the service of a separate agenda, and the hood film cycle certainly sets its 'good' victim-heroes in opposition to its one-dimensional 'evil' villains (Bishop in *Juice* and Nino in *New Jack City* are the most overt). But while the narratives of these films may focus on the limited, psychological conflict between these characters, thematically, the hood film again recasts the terms of its employment of melodramatic form. There is a much larger villain wreaking havoc in this cycle of melodrama: crack cocaine. Apart from *Do the Right Thing*, which controversially avoided its depiction, each and every single hood film foregrounds its urban plight directly within the context of the crack epidemic that swept major American cities during the 1980s, and the deepening cycle of poverty, unemployment, political apathy, police repression, and gang activity that arose in its wake. The hood film cycle goes to great lengths to portray this affliction from all angles: dealers, drug lords, addicts, cops, and residents. Suffice it to say, crack cocaine is deserving of its Manichaeian vilification, and certainly suits its melodramatic portrayal. With the melodramatic mode of the hood film now adequately mapped, we can turn to the subject of this vilification: the melodrama of the map.

### **The melodrama of geography: the hood film's spatial pathos**

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It ain't nothin like the shit you saw on TV.  
 Palm trees and blonde bitches?  
 I'd advise to you to pack your shit and get the fuck on;  
 punk motherfucker!

Ice Cube (of N.W.A. and *Boyz N the Hood*),  
 "How to Survive in South Central"

The hood film certainly operates on the principles of the melodramatic mode, but as a narrowly defined cycle of films with specific concerns, it is of particular interest to note how the hood film adapts melodrama for its own spatial problematic. This reconfiguration entails the modification of two of the most central concerns of melodrama – the home and the *melos* – in a decidedly uncharacteristic manner. The home has typically been the "space of innocence" (Brooks, 1976, p. 29) in melodrama, but as the home is portrayed as just one of the many afflicted and deprived spaces in the hood film, the central place of concern becomes the hood *writ large*. Although there are central characters with which to follow the narrative, a multitude of characters and relationships are presented in order to attempt a full portrait of the community. Private spaces in the home are viewed very rarely; instead,

much of the action takes place on the streets, in alleyways and vacant lots, and throughout the hood's urbanscape. "It is the primacy of this spatial logic, locating black urban youth experience within an environment of continual proximate danger that largely defines the hood film" (Forman, 2002, p. 258). The focus of the hood film becomes the power relations inherent in space, where race determines place; this is a story of the melodrama of geography.

Paula J. Massood's *Black City Cinema* (2003) provides a useful approach to analyzing the hood film, as she utilizes Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope to explore the way African-American film is often preoccupied with the urban cityscape. A *topos* (place or person) that embodies or is embodied by *chronos* (time), Bakhtin's chronotope is a model for exploring temporal and spatial categories embodied within a text. The chronotope views spatial constructs as "'materialized history,' where temporal relationships are literalized by the objects, spaces, or persons with which they intersect" (Massood, 2003, p. 4). In Massood's judgment, the chronotope is of particular relevance to African-American filmmaking, as its main historical moments are often concerned with the contemporary city, from Oscar Micheaux's connection to the Harlem Renaissance to blaxploitation's use of the sprawling black ghetto in Los Angeles and New York City, resulting in the black ghetto chronotope. In the early 1990s, the hood film would come to redefine black cinematic space with what Massood refers to as the hood chronotope.

A strong sense of 'here and now' pervades the hood chronotope. All of the narratives in the hood film genre take place in confined geographic coordinates – South Central Los Angeles, Watts, Brooklyn, or Harlem – and all are filmed on location. Nearly every narrative is explicitly marked to be diegetically taking place concurrently with the film's theatrical release. Corresponding to the coming-of-age trope, the hood functions as the space where *right now*, young African-Americans are struggling to grow up in bleak conditions. According to Massood (2003), *Boyz* "literally mapped out the terrain of the contemporary black city for white, mainstream audiences" (p. 153). An important impetus for the creation of this hood chronotope is to shed light on a then mostly unseen geographic space in mainstream media.

It is fitting that *Boyz* and *Menace* are both set in Los Angeles, a city that notoriously manufactures its reality through fantasy, primarily via Hollywood's spectacular imagery. Creating a self-image of abundance and sunny paradise, L.A. privileges its prosperous areas – Beverly Hills, Hollywood, Bel-Air, Malibu – while excluding its "other" spaces from representation. *Boyz* and *Menace* construct an image of Los Angeles overrun with poverty, violence, drugs, and racism – "a likeness that stands in contradistinction to the tropical paradise manufactured both by the city's boosters and by the movie industry" (Massood, 2003, p. 148). The films are thus self-reflexive discourses about the dynamics of power inherent in representation and image manufacture. Along with rap music and footage of the Rodney King beating and the subsequent riot, the hood film exposes the 'two-ness' of African-American identification, both inside and outside the 'American' experience.

On the other hand, the hood film is also concerned with remedying an outsider (read: white) examination of the hood. South Central Los Angeles had only received cursory treatment in the American social imagination up until the hood film, and what was represented was

crude and sensationalistic. A highly publicized 1988 TV special by Tom Brokaw and the film *Colors* (Dennis Hopper, 1988) both concentrated solely on gang warfare, failing to provide any substantial context for the catastrophic environments presented. "Singleton's task [with *Boyz*] in part," according to Michael Eric Dyson (1992), "is a filmic demythologization of the reigning tropes, images, and metaphors that have expressed the experience of life in South Central Los Angeles" (p. 125). The melodramatic mode is crucial here in presenting a diverse range of sympathetic characters and relationships that complicate this previously unsophisticated and undeveloped view of the hood. Thus, the hood film bears a heavy burden of representation; it must portray the ugly realities of a Los Angeles rarely seen, but not fall into the sensationalistic, one-dimensional depictions that it is attempting to correct.

One of the ways the hood film navigates this tenuous representation is to present the city as a bounded civic space made up of contained communities. The feelings of enclosure and entrapment become palpable in the hood film, and a system of signs is encoded in the terrain to make this atmosphere explicit. The first shot of *Boyz* – following its title card and chilling statistic that "One out of every twenty-one Black American males will be murdered in their lifetime. Most will die at the hands of another Black male" – has the camera dramatically tracking in on a stop sign, filling the screen with the word "STOP" while a plane flies overhead in the distance. Signaling both the desire for mobility and the institutional limits that prevent such movement, this sign is just the first in a series of "One Way" and "Do Not Enter" signs that pervade the urban environment of the film, controlling movement and preventing free passage. *Menace* exhibits a similar system of signs; prior to Caine being shot and his cousin fatally wounded, a sign for Crenshaw Boulevard is shown while a streetlight turns red, again suggesting the limitations of movement within the hood.

On the other side of the country, entrapment and enclosure takes on a different materialization. As opposed to the horizontal hood of South Central Los Angeles, the hood in *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, *Juice*, and *Clockers* is a vertical construction, set among New York's high-rise housing projects and adjacent neighborhoods. Constraint and restricted mobility is evidenced here by visual tightness and spatial compression, fueling the stress and tension of the narrative. Rather than street signs, buildings and brick exteriors become the visual motif of "a world of architectural height and institutional might that by contrast diminishes their own stature as black teenagers in the city" (Forman, 2002, p. 270). Unlike the spatial expanse of South Central Los Angeles, the hood in New York is a maze of constricting and connecting contours, violence and death waiting around every corner. Like the airplane in the opening of *Boyz*, *Clockers* uses the motif of the train to signal the desire for mobility.

Common to hoods on both the East and West coast, however, is the ominous presence of the police. While most characters in the hood are seen as victims of their surroundings, there is one individual that is unanimously disdained in the hood film: the oppressive police officer. In *Boyz*, the recurring appearance of two patrol officers, the more abusive of the two being black, again indicates a strong institutional constraint on mobility. A multitude of aural and visual cues also speaks to this ubiquity of police surveillance, particularly the persistent searchlights and off-screen sounds of police helicopters. Invoking Foucault's panopticon,

Massood (2003) claims “this method of control, dispersed over the urbanscape, facilitates efforts to keep the community in its place through the internalization of surveillance and the consciousness of perceived criminality” (p. 156). Scenes in both *Boyz* and *Menace* show the boys being stopped and harassed by the police for simply driving in the wrong place at the wrong time, reinforcing this idea of perceived criminality based on geography.

From Michael Stewart (see Levine, 1987) to Eleanor Bumpers (see Prial, 1987) to Rodney King (see Mydans, 1992) to Amadou Diallo (see Fritsch, 2000), there is a long history of police brutality against innocent African-Americans with no justice brought upon the perpetrators. *Do the Right Thing* was released in the midst of a series of racially motivated crimes perpetrated by New York City police officers, and a few of these cases are explicitly mentioned in the film, as characters yell out “Michael Stewart,” “Eleanor Bumpers,” and “Howard Beach” (see McFadden, 1986) during the riot scene. The credit sequence also pays respect and dedicates the film to the families of six recent victims of police brutality. Michael Stewart is of particular importance to this film, as Radio Raheem’s (Bill Nunn) death is a direct mirroring of Stewart’s attack. In 1983, Michael Stewart, a 25 year-old black man, was arrested for scribbling graffiti and was subsequently choked to death by three officers who were eventually acquitted of any wrongdoing. The scene is re-enacted in *Do the Right Thing*, an example of what is referred to by Spike Lee, in the DVD director’s commentary of the film, as the “Michael Stewart Chokehold.”

Another integral element in this spatial configuration of the hood is the strong connection to rap and hip-hop culture. In fact, it was the song “Boyz-N-the-Hood” by Easy-E in 1986 that first established ‘the hood’ as an important term in the spatial discourse of young urban blacks across the country. West Coast ‘gangsta rap,’ particularly N.W.A.’s *Straight Outta Compton* in 1989, “vividly portrays the hood as a space of violence and confrontation, a zone of indiscriminate aggression where threat and danger are commonplace, even banal” (Forman, 2002, pp. 263–4). Both intimately concerned with spatial logic, sharing narrative and visual imagery, as well as common language and codes of masculinity, gangsta rap and the hood film demonstrate a bond of cross-pollination and reciprocal influence. The casting of popular hip-hop artists as key characters – Ice Cube in *Boyz*, MC Eiht and Pooh Man in *Menace*, Ice T in *New Jack City*, Sticky Fingaz in *Clockers*, and Tupac Shakur in *Juice* – as well as many more in supporting roles contributes to each film’s credibility and authenticity among young audiences, while at the same time providing enhanced exposure for the musicians, most of whom contribute to the film’s soundtrack. Dyson (1992) partially attributes this coalescence to the problems of the hood, whereby “young black males have responded in the last decade primarily in a rapidly flourishing independent popular culture, dominated by two genres: rap music and black film ... [where they can] visualize and verbalize their perspectives on a range of social, personal, and cultural issues” (p. 124). As a result, the use of rap music is a textual and paratextual modernization of the melodramatic mode.

Not only does the use of rap music contribute to the hood film’s specificity of place, but also its specificity of temporality. In *Boyz*, for instance, the scenes of Tre’s childhood are

accompanied by nondiegetic jazz-based, ambient music, but when the narrative is propelled into the present, to the same year as the film's release, rap music signifies and solidifies this shift. In addition, the hood film's use of urban dialogue and clothing (such as Spike Lee's fixation with basketball sneakers and sports jerseys) complement the sound of urban experience with its look. Placing the narrative in a specific time and place, providing it with cultural currency, rap music – and its accompanying urban referents – is essential to the portrayal of the hood chronotope.

As indicated in its literal meaning, “drama accompanied by melody,” melodrama is fundamentally tied to its use of music to emphasize and underscore its pivotal moments. Rap music is used in just such a fashion, but it also incorporates another melodramatic trope: the lower classes. As its historical emergence among the poor in the French Revolution indicates, “melodrama sides with the powerless” (Vicinus, 1981, p. 130). Rap music similarly arose out of lower-class conditions – the Bronx in New York City – and along with its spatial and temporal priorities, provides a perfect complement to the melodrama of the hood film. Public Enemy's “Fight the Power,” commissioned specifically for *Do the Right Thing*, acts as a diegetic soundtrack within the film, the physical catalyst for the film's violent conflict, and a rallying call against the injustice faced in the hood. Again cloaking itself with a veneer of realism, in this case hip hop, the hood film puts the melos back in melodrama.

Beyond mere melos, however, the hood film also updates the melodramatic form by including multiple forms of media within its diegetic world, amounting to an explicit engagement with intermediality. Playing news media clips of crime reports is a common trope used in many of the films, and as viewers we are often watching the characters watch, both film and television. A pivotal scene in *New Jack City* has Nino and associates watching *Scarface* (De Palma, 1983), the image of Tony Montana projected on to his body in a not-so-subtle allusion, while *Juice* similarly has Bishop excitedly cheering on his gangster idol when watching *White Heat* (Raoul Walsh, 1949). *Juice* foregrounds DJing both as Q's (Omar Epps) chance at escaping the hood and as the main attraction in a variety of settings, while *Menace* has O-Dog continually replaying a surveillance videotape of himself throughout the film, and Caine summarily dismisses the shiny optimism of *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946). *Clockers* contains the most explicit intermedial examples, Lee having created both an egregious music video of exaggerated rap clichés (brandishing guns, scantily clad women, malt liquor), seen on television in the bar, as well as a violent video game called “Gangsta” (which required its own production team), played by young Shorty in the film. Both underscore the media's contribution to urban violence. “The use of media within each film's narrative framework represents,” according to Antonio (2002), “a cinematic vaccine, concocted by each director and offered in small yet powerful doses, to stimulate the mind's critical abilities and encourages a different kind of resistance” (p. 117). More than just melodrama then, we get a kind of media-drama that collages various media to express its spatial pathos.

These multiple elements that build the spatial and temporal logic of the hood lead to the central dilemma of the cycle: should the hood be abandoned? This is a unique twist on the

typical melodramatic trajectory; whereas the home is traditionally the space of innocence to be restored in melodrama, the hood – in the place of the home – is seen as beyond rescue in the hood film. *Boyz, Menace*, and *Clockers* problematically advocate fleeing the hood as the only means of survival and advancement. Paradoxically, with the privileging of the father in *Boyz* (also problematic), Furious Styles (Laurence Fishburne) instills Tre with the ethical responsibility desperately needed to stop the violence in the hood, but it instead equips him with the mobility to leave the hood for college in Atlanta. Similarly, *Menace* also suggests leaving the hood as the only means of escaping the cycle of violence and crime, although Caine does suggest Atlanta is just another ghetto where they will remain victims of institutional racism. To those who cannot escape the hood, or cannot escape it in time, only death awaits.

On the surface, we can take issue with such a seemingly contradictory resolution. If the hood film works so hard to communicate the problems facing this community, why would it advocate its abandonment? This false dilemma seemingly

reinforces the conservatives' one-sided picture of personal responsibility and choice, conceals the racist underpinnings of spatial containment, and deflects attention from the need of governmental and social agencies to financially and logistically support and assist black inner-city districts in urban renewal and social healing.

(Chan, 1998, p. 46)

While a critique such as Chan's against the hood film's abandonment of its own concern is certainly valid, viewing the dilemma from the perspective of its melodramatic mode presents another story. This logic of "flee the hood or die" is typical of the melodramatic "logic of the excluded middle" (Brooks, 1976, p. 15), in which dilemmas are posed in Manichaeian terms. By framing the protagonist's predicament as a do-or-die scenario, the opportunity is created for the pathos-through-action climaxes discussed previously. As a result, the victim-hero earns sympathy and the moral good is revealed, inviting the viewer to be moved by the victim's dire circumstances, in this case, the detrimental conditions of the hood.

Furthermore, as Laura Mulvey (1987) so elegantly states, "the strength of the melodramatic form lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road, a cloud of over-determined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes" (p. 76). Even if the conclusion of *Boyz* were a lavish Hollywood wedding between Tre and Brandi, it would not erase the previous 90 minutes of turmoil. In this sense, the contention over the abandonment of the hood, and the difference between the endings of *Boyz* and *Menace*, is rendered moot on account of the melodramatic actualization of the hood. There are certainly other problematic features of the hood film – its paradoxical glorification of the spectacle of violence while advocating against it, its "troubled" gender roles, to put it mildly – but its overarching melodrama is of an ultimately racist spatial construction of the hood, where physical and psychological barriers are erected that confine an underclass to



a segregated space. This overarching problem is not lost to whatever narrative or thematic inconsistencies one may find.

Williams (1998) claims that “critics and historians of moving images have often been blind to the forest of melodrama because of their attention to the trees of genre” (p. 60). The first half of this essay aims to have remedied that mistake concerning the hood film cycle and its overlooked foundation of melodrama. With a consideration of its focus on the hood as a whole rather than merely the home, as well as its intermedial update to the mode, the second half of the essay reminds us that whatever problems with the *melo-ghetto* we may find, we would be wise to not be distracted by the trees of its problematizations; instead, we should focus on the forest of the hood’s spatial melodrama. “A class is defined,” according to Bourdieu (1984), “as much by its *being-perceived* as by its *being*” (p. 483). As evidenced by the hitherto undiscovered melodramatic core to hood habitus, we might add that a class is defined as much by its being-*misperceived* as well.

## Notes

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1. The hood film cycle occurred in the midst of a series of high-profile racial injustices, culminating in the 1992 Rodney King verdict and subsequent riot: “the stark videotape, the acquittal of the four white police officers, and the uprising that followed it marked a consciousness-shaping moment for a whole new generation of Americans” (Guerrero, 1993, p. 162).
2. With *Clockers*, Spike Lee intended to create “The hood movie to end all hood movies” (as quoted in Taubin, 1995, p. 76), which it accomplishes, arguably, through its self-conscious genre deconstruction. The release of two successful parodies, *CB4* (Tamra Davis, 1993) and *Don’t Be a Menace To South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* (Paris Barclay, 1996), as well as a mockumentary, *Fear of a Black Hat* (Rusty Cundieff, 1994), further solidified the cycle’s expiration date of 1996, at the latest. Distant ‘tremors’ would include *Belly* (Hype Williams, 1998) and *Slam* (Marc Levin, 1998), while Eminem’s quasi-autobiography *8 Mile* (Curtis Hanson, 2002) at least pays homage to Douglas Sirk’s classic melodrama *Imitation of Life* (1959), with a clip of it seen on television in his trailer. HBO’s universally acclaimed *The Wire* (David Simon, 2002–2008) also exhibits many of the characteristics of the *melo-ghetto*, again cloaking itself in realism, spatial logic, and hip hop.
3. Antonio (2002) traces the utilization of the American gangster formula and style through *New Jack City*, *Boyz*, *Juice*, *Just Another Girl on the I.R.T.*, *Menace II Society*, and *Clockers*; she fails to mention melodrama even once.
4. The *Cineaste* review of *Boyz* is representative: “Behind the streetwise verisimilitude is the soundstage sensibility of a very traditional Hollywood melodrama” (Doherty, p. 16). Guerrero (1993) at least goes beyond mere disparaging one-off comment, accusing *Boyz* of “dominant narrative convention” because of “its melodramatic devotion to the cult of the enterprising individual” which results in it “becoming the raw material of consumer materialism” (p. 186). But not only is this a misreading of melodramatic form, Guerrero misses the manner in which *Boyz* actually utilizes melodrama to achieve what he commends as its “subtle weave of aspirations, frustrations, and violent outburst [that add] complexity and occasional contradiction to the director’s antiviolence message” (p. 185). A similarly mistaken conflation of melodrama with “Hollywood formula” occurs with his

consideration of *Juice*; whereas Guerrero locates its weakness in “reduc[ing] pressing collective issues to the drama of individual weaknesses and victimization,” (p. 189), I would maintain that it is through this very victimization and melodramatic recognition of innocence and virtue that *Juice*, and the hood film in general, expresses its “pressing collective issues.”

5. *Do the Right Thing* was criticized for its lack of drugs in its depiction of Bed-Stuy, to which *Boyz* and other early hood films can be seen as responding to with their ample inclusion of drug use and its detrimental effect on the hood. *Menace* is then an explicit response to what the directors saw as sentimentalism in *Boyz*, followed by Lee’s *Clockers*, which self-consciously deconstructs the entire genre.
6. The contempt cinematic melodrama receives is most immediately recognizable in negative reviews of Hollywood’s ‘serious’ dramas intended for Oscar consideration; recent examples include *The Blind Side* (John Lee Hancock, 2009), *The Reader* (Stephen Daldry, 2008), and *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2005).
7. The implications of this controversial scene have been debated endlessly (Mitchell, 1991; Christensen, 1991; McKelly, 1998; etc.), but to my knowledge, never from the perspective of Mookie as melodramatic victim-hero.

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