

Close-Up: Hip-Hop Cinema

Introduction: Hip-Hop Cinema as a Lens of Contemporary Black Realities

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The focus for this Close-Up on hip-hop cinema examines how hip-hop culture and its aesthetics manifest on film. For nearly half a century, hip-hop has served as a mouthpiece for exploring the marginalized experiences of black and brown people in the United States and abroad. Hip-hop was more than a popular cultural expression. It served as a context for complicating and recognizing a transition into a post-civil rights movement era. More specifically, hip-hop expressed the messiness of the generational angsts about race, class, and identity that were left unresolved from the movement. For the most part, America's embrace of hip-hop has been its musicality and its associated aesthetics. The focus on lyricism and production, very much integral to understanding the agency behind hip-hop's message, leaves much room for considering the other elements of hip-hop cultural production such as its visual narratives. I am not referencing the music videos that accompanied the music, though some videos such as Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" (intentionally) resemble outtakes from Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing* (1989). As hip-hop crossed over into mainstream American popular culture in the 1980s and 1990s, its influence also reached across community and cultural boundaries. It would be remiss to not point out that hip-hop's growing popularity paralleled its increasing profitability. Hip-hop's growing influence on American popular culture needed to simultaneously amplify its beginnings in urban working-class black and brown communities while making room to present a narrative that was alluring and profitable to a mainstream white audience.

For the purpose of the examinations that follow, we focus on hip-hop cinema as a mainstream and commercial phenomenon, as well as the visualization of hip-hop's cultural identities, aesthetics, and iconography that signify hip-hop's influence on the American popular imagination. Some of these identities and aesthetics are immediately recognizable because of their presence in hip-hop music: the focus on working-class; predominantly

black communities in urban areas; the inner tension of a young black man attempting to establish self agency while balancing the needs and desires of his community; and an urban soundtrack of hip-hop music and its preceding music genres such as funk or soul, often sonic markers of generational and cultural differences of masculine expression between characters and plot. The inclusion of previous eras' popular black music is significant in establishing not only a cultural trajectory from which hip-hop emerges but also the importance of black identities as non-linear and frequently in conversation with each other. Kenton Rambsy's intriguing essay focuses on Jay-Z's album *American Gangster*, a soundtrack for the 2007 film starring Denzel Washington about 1960s and 1970s drug kingpin Frank Lucas. Rambsy utilizes the literary method of analysis known as textual mining to explore Jay-Z's use of the *American Gangster* film to produce not only a hip-hop soundtrack but also to map out the impact of the film on his emceeing.

Additionally, hip-hop cinema also highlights hip-hop performers, whether in front of the camera as actors or behind it like the cinematic career of rappers like Ice Cube, who is examined as both an actor and as a producer in this collection of essays. Brandon J. Manning explores the presence of vulnerable black masculinity in Ice Cube's first screenplay, *Friday* (dir. F. Gary Gray, 1995). Manning interrogates Ice Cube's positioning and balancing of inner-city black men's interiority and emotional baggage using humor. Adam Haupt's essay interrogates representations of the profitability of hip-hop narratives within white-supremacist constructs as seen in the biopic *Straight Outta Compton*. Overall, hip-hop cinema is a visual interrogation of how hip-hop sustains and also challenges articulations of post-civil rights black experiences.

Further, it is important to provide a brief chronological overview of how hip-hop cinema created space for itself in popular culture. Hip-hop cinema made space to articulate the frustrations and challenges of urban black life after the civil rights movement. In initial portrayals of hip-hop in the late 1980s and 1990s, hip-hop culture was a subject for documentation; more specifically, its dances and the validation of graffiti as an artistic expression. Films like *Wildstyle* (1983) featured prominent hip-hop pioneers and featured New York as not only a location but a characterization of hip-hop as urban, young, and experimental. *Breakin'* (1984) focused on break dancing and shifted coasts with a setting in Los Angeles.

While the West Coast would play a prominent role in the articulation of the hood film genre of the 1990s, New York retained its site as the originator of hip-hop via the films of directors like Lee. Lee, a Brooklyn native, created multiple narratives with New York and Brooklyn at its center using hip-hop. Although Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" is now an iconic representation of hip-hop as a site of contemporary black protest, Lee's film

Do the Right Thing encapsulates Public Enemy's lyrics as a hot summer day, a powder keg of racial and class tensions waiting to explode, where one of the film's protagonists, Radio Raheem, blasts the song as a signifier of the racial and class tensions that are embroiled in his neighborhood. Casarae L. Gibson's essay expounds on the significance of hip-hop culture as the foundation for the protest aesthetics visualized in the film. Gibson opens her discussion with Lee's mash-up video of the footage showing the choking death of Eric Garner in 2014 with the death of Lee's protagonist Radio Raheem from the film twenty-five years earlier. She argues that Radio Raheem serves not as a hip-hop martyr but as a hip-hop protestor.

Perhaps most recognizable as hip-hop cinema is the "hood film" genre that dominated early to mid-1990s black cinema. A subgenre of urban black films spearheaded by directors like John Singleton, Albert and Allen Hughes, Mario Van Peebles, and F. Gary Gray, hood films pivoted on the gritty reality of how working-class blacks, with particular attention to young working-class black men, struggled (often for naught) for better lives and to simply live. Films like *Boyz 'n the Hood* (dir. John Singleton, 1991), *New Jack City* (dir. Mario Van Peebles, 1991), *Juice* (dir. Ernest R. Dickerson, 1992), and *Menace II Society* (dir. Albert Hughes and Allen Hughes, 1993) offered Hobbesian renderings of inner-city black life as short, poor, nihilistic, and unforgiving. Parallel to the popularity of the gangsta-rap genre, hood films often showcased the rap talent in front of the screen and as contributors to film soundtracks. For example, Ice Cube, who proved to be just as vicious a performer onscreen as he was an emcee, was heavily utilized by Singleton in many of his films to star as the quintessential hood thinker.

Although the hood was cinematically depicted as bicoastal, masculine, and relentless, there were cinematic moments where films like Gray's *Set It Off* (1996) layered and extended working-class life to reflect the unique challenges of black women. *Set It Off*, a film about four black women who resort to robbing banks in an effort to make a better life for themselves, introduced talents like Kimberly Elise, and utilized the hood richness of then starlets like Vivica A. Fox and Jada Pinkett Smith (who boasted a close friendship with Tupac Shakur and frequently showcased her working-class Baltimore roots in her characters). Perhaps most importantly, *Set It Off* made room for recognition that "everybody in the hood ain't straight" via the dynamic performance of the character Cleo, played by Queen Latifah. In addition to Queen Latifah's performance, the presence of Dr. Dre as the character Black Sam not only reemphasized *Set It Off* as a hood film but situated the film within a West Coast gangsta aesthetic that followed the trajectory of the bulk of hood film genres before it. Additionally, *Set It Off* set a premise for recognizing black women's agency in not only hip-hop but the American popular imagination, a predecessor for future cultural moments where black women

in the face of physical, emotional, and economic violence demand America to #SayHerName (fig. 1).

In more recent cinema, filmmakers are returning to the act of centering hip-hop culture as a lens for articulating black realities in the wake of the dismissal of racial anxieties under the guise of postracialism. This *Close-Up* features a collection of essays that sets out to reshape some of the fault lines that shape hip-hop's presence on the big screen: articulations of heteronormative black masculinity, representations of psychological and socioeconomic trauma, and memory as a form of protest and resistance are some of the threads that connect these essays together. For example, films like *Dope* (dir. Rick Famuyiwa, 2015) and the release of the N.W.A. biopic *Straight Outta Compton* (dir. F. Gary Gray, 2015) revisited and questioned the politics of nostalgia for 1990s hip-hop culture and what was remembered or omitted from the historical record. I. August Durham's essay "U, (New) Black (?), Maybe" about the film *Dope* complicates the nostalgia for 1990s hip-hop featured in the film by critiquing the equally present premise of "new blackness" subscribed to by current hip-hop stars such as Pharrell Williams. While some of the featured articles revisit flagship 1990s hip-hop films, other articles such as Robin M. Boylorn's piece map out a trajectory of hip-hop-influenced cinematic representations of progressive black masculinity including *Baby Boy* (dir. John Singleton, 2001) and *Fruitvale Station* (dir. Ryan Coogler, 2013). Boylorn examines the impact of generational and social-cultural tensions that afflict the main male characters' performance of black masculinity on film.



Figure 1: Still of Frankie, Cleo, TeSean, and Stony after a robbery from *Set It Off* (dir. F. Gary Gray, 1996)

In addition to analyzing hip-hop cinema as a realistic portrayal of contemporary black life, Peter Kunze offers a useful analysis into hip-hop's forays into other aspects of popular culture like animation. Kunze's article examines hip-hop as a framework for engaging black youths' rebellion and class in the animated feature *Bebe's Kids* (dir. Bruce W. Smith, 1992). He argues that although the film was a commercial failure, *Bebe's Kids* points to hip-hop's then burgeoning commercial and crossover appeal in popular culture, without losing sight of its potential to bring marginalized voices to the forefront.

Ultimately, this Close-Up on hip-hop cinema seeks to usefully trouble how we view hip-hop's continued presence in the American popular imagination. Hip-hop culture serves as a dominant cultural signifier of post-civil rights blackness. In a moment where America's current cultural landscape is increasingly desperate to render itself as racially tolerant and ambiguous, hip-hop cinema offers an alternative viewpoint for stylizing and signifying the statement "Black Lives Matter." As the United States continues to assert itself as a visual oriented society, film remains a useful interstice for addressing issues of race and class. The focal point on black narratives and black bodies, both behind and in front of the camera, is central to its continued development as both a signifier and juxtaposition of unfulfilled promises of contemporary American life that continue to haunt black Americans. This collection of essays highlights hip-hop cinema's role as a mitigator that is no less messy than the culture it in part represents. The following essays provide useful frameworks for thinking through how hip-hop remains a gauge and reminder of black folks' agency within a society that would rather their agency collapse into the folds of popular culture as strictly entertainment.

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