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Realer than Reel: *Menace II Society* and the 1990s Hood Film Cycle

by Timothy J. Edwards

The convergence of numerous industrial and social factors in the late 1960s saw Hollywood studios for the first time invest in films produced with African-Americans as the target audience. This wave of Black-focused product eventually became known as 'Blaxploitation' Cinema. Blaxploitation films use cinematic devices like: location shooting, hand held camera, and sync-sound along with a showcasing of distinctly Black cultural imagery, featuring urban fashion, slang, Black nationalist politics, and of course Black popular music to create a Black ghetto chronotope which is common to all Blaxploitation films (Massood 117). While the Black ghetto chronotope has its roots in Blaxploitation, it has since become an important tool which New Black Cinema directors like the Hughes brothers further develop to depict the streets of Watts with a sharp and uncompromising sense of realism. Allen and Albert Hughes spoke of being "outraged by the Hollywood sentimentality" of the hugely successful *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), which was released two years before *Menace II Society* (1993) (Massood 162). The Hughes brothers' contribution to the 'hood film' genre consisted of a rejection of some of the established structural conventions of Hollywood, in favour of a new and grittier realism that had been unmatched by its immediate predecessors.

The young filmmakers of the 'New Black Cinema' which emerged in the early 1990s were incredibly familiar with the themes and styles of Blaxploitation texts. The legacy of Blaxploitation films lives on through the work of directors like Allen and Albert Hughes. However, in drawing connections between Blaxploitation and New Black Cinema, the iconic and pioneering intermediary that is filmmaker Spike Lee acts as the missing link in the chain. There is a ten year gap between the end of the Blaxploitation cycle and the beginning of the hood film cycle. Within that span is where the work of Spike Lee further builds on the groundwork laid down by Blaxploitation. Aside from using many of the established conventions of Blaxploitation to address more contemporary issues of race and racism, Spike Lee also paved the way for the New Black Cinema filmmakers from an industrial standpoint. Lee is arguably the first "Black Commercial Independent," meaning that he held unprecedented creative control over his films (Massood 122). Lee undoubtedly surpassed any expectations as to what a Black independent filmmaker or African-American Cinema was capable of producing. The development of distinctly African-American themes and issues in Lee's films would be further developed by New Black Cinema filmmakers. Particularly Lee's 'b-boy' characterization, Mars Blackmon from *She`s Gotta Have It* (1986) appeared in various forms in many of the early 1990s hood films. The Hughes brothers morphed the character into the recklessly violent O-Dog in their debut film *Menace II Society* (1993); he is also referred to in voice-over as "America's nightmare" by the film's protagonist, Caine (Massood 128). Lee's commercial success is at least partially attributable to the increased consumption of Black cultural product in the form of rap music in the 1980s. Likewise, the explosion of the hardcore 'gangsta rap' subgenre in the early 1990s provided the context for films like *Menace II Society* to become as popular as they indeed did.

Menace II Society continues the stylistic traditions which evolved out of Blaxploitation Cinema, and the subsequent developments of Spike Lee in the 1980s. Allen and Albert Hughes make use of

location shooting and hand-held camera to give a documentary feel to *Menace II Society*. The realistic feel of the documentary style is furthered by historical context provided in the form of archive footage of the Watts riots, as well as providing a back-story sequence of the protagonist's childhood in the form of a stylized homage sequence featuring Samuel L. Jackson as Caine's father. The distinct hood film trend of including real gangsta rap artists as both actors within the film and as artists featured on the soundtrack is reflected in *Menace* as well. This had been a recurring feature of hood films, the most notable examples including *Menace*'s immediate predecessors, with *Juice* (1992) featuring Tupac Shakur, and *Boyz n the Hood* featuring Ice Cube. The inclusion of these artists in their films' cast contributes to the credibility and sense of realism because the on screen persona of the artists is an unaltered extension of their musical personae. MC Eiht's character, A-Wax is just such an extension of the persona of the nihilistic gangsta which he exudes in the film's title song, "Streiht Up Menace." All of the elements you would come to expect from a hood film are present; however the Hughes' are not completely satisfied with the realism that their use of documentary style provides. Of the film which *Menace* is a direct response to, *Boyz n the Hood*, the Hughes brothers response to the film's melodramatic elements was that of "outrage [at the] Hollywood sentimentality." The directors set out to further reconstruct the narrative structure of the hood film to reflect the reality of inner city youth, which they evidently believed *Boyz n the Hood* failed to accurately represent. The Hughes' task became restructuring the aspects of the previous hood films which they felt did not accurately reflect the reality of inner city youth. The structure of *Menace II Society* consists of a rejection of Hollywood's ideological melodramatic conventions because the Hughes felt that it detracted from the realism that they sought to achieve with their filmic response to *Boyz*.

Ideology is the most rudimentary, yet subconsciously read component of any film's composition. The protagonist in the Classical Hollywood narrative consistently conveys unto the audience the 'quintessential American' ideals of individualism, and self determinism. These ideals are conveyed through the ability of the protagonist to affect change unto his/her environment (Gormley 191). This is the most central and crucial of all the conventions of Hollywood cinema which *Menace II Society* deconstructs, again for the purpose of providing a greater sense of realism and immediacy than was offered in *Boyz n the Hood*. Caine is unable to prevent his environment from defining him, and he is certainly unable to affect any change unto his environment. While a common theme of Hood films expressed is that criminally oriented black youth are simply a product of their environment, *Menace II Society* tragically shows just how inescapable the hood environment really is for young men like Caine.

The two forces in the film which Caine is torn between are his girlfriend Ronnie, who does everything in her power to convince him to leave Watts and join her in Atlanta, and the effects of the generational transmission of the self-destructive hood lifestyle. It is not insignificant that the film begins by introducing the audience to Caine's violent, drug dealing father and his drug addicted mother. In voice-over Caine reveals that it was his parents that first turned him onto the criminal lifestyle. *Menace* further explores other possible ways out for Caine in the form of the character Sharif and his father, Mr. Butler. Both Sharif and Butler are of a Black Nationalist political persuasion. The Black Nationalist discourse is simply inaccessible for Caine, probably because seeing Black men murdering each other every day does not inspire a sense of Black brotherhood. The two are unsuccessful in trying to convince

Caine to move to Kansas to start anew. Caine's Grandparents are very religious, and while they clearly love him and care about his well-being, their efforts to reform him through recitation of Bible passages are even less successful than Sharif and Mr. Butler's evocation of Black Nationalist discourse. The complete disconnect of Caine from his Grandparents is likely the result of intergenerational conflict, a theme that appears in Lee and Singleton's work as well in the form of characters like Da Mayor and Furious, respectively. The rapid deterioration of Watts after the riots saw a middle class Black neighbourhood that would have been thriving in the time of Caine's Grandparents, rapidly plunged into the depths of poverty by the late 1960s. Readings from the Holy Bible for Caine simply go "in one ear, and out the other." An interesting critique of "Hollywood sentimentality," as mentioned previously, can be found in the different reactions of Caine and his Grandmother while watching *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). It is the scene where George Bailey is reunited with his family, and while Caine's Grandmother smiles and is near tears, Caine looks over at her with an expression of disbelief that seems to say "how can you buy into this?"

The story progresses at breakneck speed until both the police, now in control of the store surveillance tape, and another Watts youth seeking revenge for a beating, close in on O-Dog and Caine. The film ends in utter tragedy when Caine and Sharif are gunned down in a drive-by shooting minutes before leaving with Ronnie for Atlanta, and perhaps only days before Sharif would be leaving for Kansas. In voice-over Caine narrates his dying thoughts: that he did care to continue living, but that it was too late. This tragic ending encapsulates the element of realism, which is so carefully constructed in the film. The death of Caine in the film's final scene is characteristic of the Classical Hollywood gangster film. While Caine is not a sympathetic character throughout the film, his death is tragic because he was so close to being able to start over. This ending provides an alternative to the Hollywood gangster film where the protagonist is completely unsympathetic. This revision of the classic gangster film structure makes up the last piece of the puzzle in the Hughes' project to 'up the ante' in their cinematic realism. An interesting insertion of a diegetic reference to the classic gangster film *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938) in the scene where Caine is in the hospital makes these ties to the gangster genre more concrete. The reference is significant because it is at this time that Ronnie comes to pick him up, this functions as a kind of foreshadowing of his eventual death, and shows that even the strong female presence that is unique in *Menace II Society* is still not enough to rescue Caine from his Gangster lifestyle.

The Hughes brothers' contribution to the hood film genre consisted of a rejection of some of the established structural conventions of Hollywood in favour of portraying a much grittier realism than had been achieved by *Menace II Society'*s immediate predecessors. The trajectory of African-American Cinema since Blaxploitation, and leading up to *Menace*'s release, saw the development of a unique film language and tradition. Spike Lee's work continued this tradition, as well as influenced the New Black Cinema filmmakers of the 1990s, both with his fierce independence and with the intensely political content of his films. The tapering-off of hood film production after *Menace* is somewhat of a testament to its impact on the genre. In a way *Menace* represents a turning point in the continuing saga of African-American Cinema because the cycle was essentially regarded as exhausted in the wake of the high number of hood films that were produced in such a short time. It is unknown at this time when the next cycle or wave of African-American Cinema in Hollywood might surface, but it is certain that *Menace*

*II Society'*s influence will be felt within those future works.

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