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Boyz ‘n the Hood

Tre Styles’ and My Coming of Age Tale

 When this movie was released in June 1991, I was only eleven years old. As I watch it now, twenty-one years removed, and much more mature, I cannot believe that I was allowed to watch this film then; not because I am a prude and cannot handle language, the violence or adult-themed situations, but rather, I was allowed a peek into a very “real” world at a very young age. I don’t remember if my parents actually said I could watch it, or if my older brothers didn’t think it was a big deal. Either way, I remember watching this with very big eyes and a very impressionable psyche. Seeing *Boyz ‘n the Hood* for the first time was, for me, one of those moments I can look back on in my childhood past that defined my future. Similar to how Tre Styles is forced into dealing with mature situations at an immature age, I was given a glimpse into the fact that I was pretty sheltered in my own life.

This movie has really never left the forefront of my mind. I cannot say that I feel a particular emotional connection because of the situations portrayed in the movie, but rather, the hopelessness I sense from writer-director John Singleton. If he intended to wrap all of the hope of the African-American community up in the character of Tre Styles, in my opinion, he missed the mark, and instead, painted a picture of South Central Los Angeles that unfortunately has become the history that we reflect on in conjunction with the many gang and race-related events of the early 1990’s. With twenty years older eyes, I believe this movie has glorified the “gangsta” lifestyle that permeated the nineties, shown through the characters of Doughboy, Chris, and Dooky, instead of promoting the “good-kids persona” of Tre and Ricky. Maybe that was just the reality of the last decade of the twentieth century, a backlash from the moral push within coming of age television shows and movies of the seventies and eighties1.

Growing up in middle-to-upper class Massachusetts towns and cities, my family and friends were not exposed to the situations presented in a movie like *Boyz ‘n the Hood, New Jack City* and *Friday*. However, because of these movies and the following surge of gangsta/rap music and other movies that dealt with similar situations, people that were not privy to the lifestyles portrayed suddenly started to embody and elevate gangsta-like behaviors. I think, instead of warning children and teenagers against the perils of that brand of behavior, Singleton may have accidentally put gangstas up on a pedestal, even with many of the main characters dying within the span of the film itself, or through the storyline text at the end of the film.

Singleton, I believe, intended to put the blame on corporate America, through the context of Furious Styles’ speech on the hillside in front of a Compton billboard. However, because that was such a small sequence within a much larger film, it was just lost, buried and bulldozed by the allure of the antics of life in the ‘hood. I understand that his intention must have been to shine a spotlight upon the injustices of life in the ‘hood, and maybe if he had made this movie with a few more years of life experience and maturity, it may have been a very different film. He was only twenty-four at the time this film was released in 1991, not far removed from his own experiences of growing up in Los Angeles, California. Perhaps that was his intention, to still feel a real connection with the situations he’d lived through --- that “authentic black urban experience” (1) --- and not lose the edge that is unmistakable when watching the film. Just as the movie is a coming of age tale, I believe that, as viewers, we’re given access into Singleton’s own maturation through the writing and directing of this eternal piece of film history2.

Singleton credits his parents with keeping him off the streets and setting good examples for him, so it’s easy to see that his experience is personified in the character of Tre Styles. Singleton’s parents were unmarried and lived apart – his father, a mortgage broker, his mother, a pharmaceutical representative, similar to Furious and Reva within the context of the film. Singleton uses the medium of film to address many of the issues that he himself faced as an adolescent growing up in Los Angeles.

Furious Styles is shown as a Christ-like sage, always with a story or quip to help explain a situation to his young son Tre, after the two are forced to live together full-time. Reva, Tre’s mother, brings the boy to Furious at the age of ten after having multiple disciplinary problems at school. Singleton uses this plot device to show that having a strong father figure in a young man’s life is paramount to a well-adjusted adolescence. This, juxtaposed against brothers Doughboy and Ricky’s lack of a father-figure, only strengthens the argument. Furious is shown as a no-nonsense authoritarian, with Tre’s friends commenting “your daddy’s mean” when he sets rules and regulations for Tre. For me, watching Furious only reinforced that my own father’s parenting style maybe wasn’t so bad. Maybe because he took an interest in my life and goings-on, all the while living in a good area, then I never had to deal with the things that Tre Styles had to in South Central.

After we’re re-introduced to the characters in a flash forward after the initial story ends as Tre and Ricky are entering their senior year of high school, Tre continues to be presented as the different kid, because he doesn’t drink, do drugs, or have sex. He has a steady job, good grades, and prospects for a future, very much unlike the plight of Ricky’s half-brother Doughboy specifically. Tre, Brandi and Ricky are shown as the minority of minorities, with their moral compasses always pointing north. In watching this film as a pre-teen, I gravitated more towards these three characters than any of the other characters. Perhaps this was because I was still very much a child, unlike my older brothers who were close to graduating high school at the time. They chose to embrace some of the nuances of the characters of Doughboy, Chris and Dooky, like drinking, doing drugs and having sex.

Watching this film again through more mature eyes, and reading the articles you’ve provided for us, it’s clearer to me now that John Singleton was simply trying to relate the television shows and movies that I referenced earlier to the particular demographic of people that he was closest to, the African-American community, specifically in South Central. I never really picked up on the fact that the beginning and ending are direct homage to Rob Reiner’s *Stand by Me*, with the image of four boys, walking along railroad tracks, in search of a dead body at the beginning of the film; while at the end, with the on-screen text letting us know of Doughboy’s fate against a sleepy melodical score heavily influenced Singleton when creating his first feature film. Perhaps his thinking was movies like *Stand By Me* were not popular or relatable to people in his community, whereas I found those movies very accessible.

I was also taken aback with how many street signs are prevalent within the span of the film. From the opening shot of the alarmingly red STOP sign, to the many different “One Way” or “Do Not Enter” signs shown throughout the span of the film. Massood, in her article, discussed the significance of these signs as “convey[ing] that free passage is not allowed.” (2) Most of the film shows places that the main characters should and should not go, with Tre, Brandi and Ricky pursuing escape from the ‘hood completely. Throughout the film, the viewers are shown dividing lines of good versus dangerous places, even within the ‘hood itself. For instance, Ricky and Tre are trepidatious in leaving their home neighborhood and journeying into Compton with Furious. They look around terrified at the people gathering, and are visibly scared to be there. I found this interesting that Singleton chose to highlight that even within the ‘hood, there are places you don’t go, unless you have “paid” some sort of price with honor or respect. Crenshaw seems to be the only place that is truly neutral grounds, with rivaling gangs meeting and relative peace is experienced. The shove that Ricky and his eventual killers share at Crenshaw sets off the events that will leave a mother without her favorite son, and eventually losing the son she wished she never had. If Tre and Brandi hadn’t already thought about getting out of the ‘hood and California at large before the moment of Ricky’s death, I’m sure it was the proverbial nail in the coffin that sent them away to Alabama. For me, I lived in an upper-class neighborhood in a small Irish-Catholic town, and the Irish mafia was extremely hidden --- not in plain view, like in South Central. So while I understood the plight of gang related activities, after a few viewings, and especially after the Rodney King incident and ensuing L.A. riots of the early 90’s, I certainly could not empathize because I had never experienced such personal tragedy.

The character of Tre Styles is unmistakably the personification of John Singleton and he pulls many of his own life experiences and injects them into the movie that gave him an Oscar nomination for Best Director – also, the youngest ever. As I watched this at such an impressionable age, it has stuck with me throughout my adolescence and early adulthood. Now that I am almost in my mid-thirties, I look back to this film with such sadness and a feeling of hopelessness. I realize that we have not Increase[d] the Peace and if anything, we have backslid. South Central Los Angeles is still a scary place to go, and civil unrest is still extremely prevalent in many parts of the United States. There are still too many gang-related murders and crimes happening, and the ratio of black-on-black murders is still higher than I care to mention. All ethnicities have elevated the gangsta lifestyle, or thug-life, as something to be attained, and something that separates the “cool” kids from the “losers.” John Singleton was able to escape the ‘hood and do good things with his fame and fortune. He has inspired other young black men to get into film-making and try to reverse trends of neighborhood violence. As for my coming-of-age through the movie *Boyz ‘n the Hood*, as a white, upper-class female, I will say that I’m thankful for a Furious Styles-like father and extremely grateful that I didn’t have to grow up in the ‘hood. With the pressures that children and teenagers have to face today, my husband and I are still undecided on whether or not we will decide to bring kids into this world. Movies like *Boyz ‘n the Hood* only contribute to this indecision.

**Footnotes:**

1 See: The Brady Bunch, Little House on the Prairie, Charles in Charge, etc.

2 Added to the National Film Registry in 2002

**Sources:**

*Boyz N the Hood*. dir. John Singleton. DVD. Columbia Pictures, 1991. Viewed May 16, 2012.

(1) Screen 42:4 Winter 2001 – Jodi Brooks – “Worrying the note’: mapping time in the gangsta film.

(2) Cinema Journal, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Winter, 1996), pp. 85-97. Mapping the Hood: The Genealogy of City Space in “Boyz N the Hood” and “Menace II Society”