

**Black, White, and Blue-Collar Noir:
A Study of Changing Depictions of Race Relations in Film Noir**

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This thesis examines the changing depictions of race relations between white working-class protagonists and African-American characters in film noir from two periods. In noirs of the 1940s and 1950s there is no evident racial tension, but in neo-noir of the 1970s black/white racial antagonism is common. This thesis contends that the political ideologies of classical noir filmmakers, which included sympathy for both the working class and racial minorities, had much to do with the positive depictions of race relations in classical film noir. The end of the studio system and financial turmoil that followed in the 1950s and 1960s caused many changes in the American movie industry, which led studios, for the first time, to experiment with film content and to hire new filmmakers to make films for a differentiated audience. The racial antagonism in neo-noirs stems from three main sources: an effort by the studios to attract an urban African-American youth audience; realistic and auto-biographic filmmaking; and an effort by white middle-class filmmakers to both reject their own racist tendencies by a process called reaction formation, and also to live out their racist fantasies vicariously through white working-class film characters.

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Introduction

Racism is a dominant trait of the white working-class characters featured in Raymond Chandler's hard-boiled detective novel *Farewell My Lovely* (1940). This is reflected in both their physical treatment of, and the language they use when speaking about, racial others. In the 1944 film based on that novel, however, there is no evidence of racism or, for that matter, of racial minorities. Yet in the 1975 remake of the film racism is again present.¹ Similarly, there is an absence of both racism and racial minorities in 1950's *The Asphalt Jungle*. In the 1972 remake of the film, *Cool Breeze*, all of the protagonists are African American, and racial tension between them and the white antagonists is featured throughout. Each of these films can be classified as film noir, a film cycle which emerged during World War II, ended in the 1950s, and then re-emerged in the early 1970s.

When African-American characters appear in classical film noir of the 1940s and 1950s, relations between them and the white working-class protagonists are rarely antagonistic. There are few instances of explicit racial tension in any of these films. This characteristic of classical film noir is reversed in neo-noir films of the 1970s, where racial tensions run high. When the neo-noir protagonist himself is not overtly racist, other white working-class men in his social circle often are. The reasons for this change will be the focus of this thesis.

Film noir is an ambiguous term. James Naremore calls film noir "one of the most

¹ Kelly Oliver makes this observation in *Noir Anxiety*. However, she believes that racism is absent in the original film because it was displaced and presented instead as antagonism towards women and notions of domesticity. See Kelly Oliver, *Noir Anxiety* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. 46-47.

amorphous categories in film history.”² Roger Ebert classifies it as a genre. The French *cineastes* who coined the term refer to it as a style. While there is no consensus on how exactly to define the term, most critics agree that films noir exhibit a mood of “nihilism,” of “cynicism, pessimism and darkness” which was likely reflective of a collective mood of anxiety across the country, brought on by the Great Depression and later by postwar readjustment.³

Janet Place and Lowell Peterson point out that many scholars and critics attempt to define film noir by focusing on the aesthetic elements which create this mood.⁴ Genre specialist Steve Neale notes that another feature widely attributed to film noir is the “mental and emotional vulnerability” of the protagonists. Neale, however, argues that both of these criteria were actually “separable features belonging to separable tendencies and trends that traversed a wide variety of genres and cycles in the 1940s and early 1950s.” For that reason, according to Neale, film noir, “as a single phenomenon,” never existed, and that is the reason why the term has never been properly defined.⁵ Geoff Mayer, however, approaches the difficult issue of defining film noir from a different angle, by focusing primarily on narrative features.

Mayer argues that films noir were part of the melodramas genre of the 1940s

² James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 11.

³ Roger Ebert, “A Guide to Film Noir Genre,” accessed September 12, 2013, available from <http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/a-guide-to-film-noir-genre>; Naremore, *More than Night*, p. 10; Paul Schrader, “Notes of Film Noir,” *Film Comment*, vol. 8, no. 1 (Spring, 1972), p. 8.

⁴ Janet Place and Lowell Peterson, “Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir,” in *Film Noir Reader*, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), p. 65.

⁵ Stephen Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 174.

specifically.⁶ Melodramas “meant [films which contained] crime, guns and violence; they meant heroines in peril; they meant action, tension, and suspense; and they meant villains.”⁷ While Neale admits that contemporary critics did use the term melodrama to describe what commentators later referred to as film noir, he argues that these films were “by no means bound by noir’s contours.” By this he means that many 1940s melodramas, even if they featured psychologically troubled protagonists, did not contain recognizable noir visual features. However, if we consider Mayer’s definition of noir then we can classify most melodramas of the 1940s as noirs since visual features, according to Mayer, are not essential to defining film noir.

Mayer argues that narrative features, not aesthetic features, are the most important aspect to consider when identifying film noir. Noirs, in Mayer’s view, contained all the elements of melodramas, but they were melodramas which featured a psychologically troubled protagonist, distinguishing them from Hollywood melodramas before and after them. The protagonists’ psychological conflict most often stems from a moral dilemma. They experience anxiety over having to choose between right and wrong. They are often tempted to follow a path they know is wrong, or that others tell them is wrong, or are unsure about which path is the right one to take. According to Mayer, “[n]o longer was the focus only on external obstacles confronting the hero or heroine, a characteristic of simple melodrama, but also the internal conflict *within* the protagonist. Thus,” Mayer continues, “film noir went beyond presenting the drama as a simple or unequivocal

⁶ Geoff Mayer and Brian McDonnell, *Encyclopedia of Film Noir* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), p. 5.

⁷ Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, p.169; The term melodrama is now often attributed to “women’s films” or “weepies.” Today critics use the term “action films” or “thrillers” to describe what critics from the 1940s called melodramas.

conflict between good and evil. Instead, they shifted the dramatic focus to the ‘psychological’ conflict that emanated from an ambivalent presentation of moral norms.”⁸

The psychologically troubled protagonist is one important element of the definition of film noir used in this thesis. However, the social status of the protagonist will also be considered. Furthermore, aesthetic elements will not be neglected entirely, as they were often used to accentuate the psychological state of the protagonist and to enhance the mood of despair.

A number of visual features are commonly attributed to film noir, although they are not necessarily exclusive to them. Indeed, as Place and Peterson point out, film noir’s mood is frequently expressed through this visual style.⁹ Unusual camera angles and lighting are often employed for this purpose. Low-angle shots, for instance, can be used to portray the menacing presence of a villain, while the placement of characters at odd locations in the frame, or filming them from canted angles, produce an unsettling feeling. Interplay between light and dark, which hides parts of the *mise-en-scene* while highlighting others, can be used for various purposes. As Place and Peterson suggest, the technique of hiding objects in the frame could imply that a character has hidden intentions, or it might connote “the mysterious and the unknown.” In film noir, low-key lighting replaced high-key lighting, standard in classical Hollywood films. The traditionally well-lit sets of Hollywood films of the 1930s conveyed normalcy, while the low-key noir lighting was used to convey “the unknown, the sinister,” or to set the stage for the

⁸ Mayer and McDonnell, *Encyclopedia*, p. 6.

⁹ Place and Peterson, “Some Visual Motifs,” p. 65.

exposition of inner feelings.¹⁰ Many noir filmmakers also used “oblique lines” to set the mood, as these “tend to splinter a screen, making it restless and unstable.”¹¹ Such is the effect created by thin strips of light shining through venetian blinds.

Another important trait of film noir is that they usually feature working-class protagonists. Often they are hard-boiled private detectives, like Philip Marlowe in *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) or *The Big Sleep* (1946). In many cases the protagonists are small-time blue-collar criminals, as in *The Asphalt Jungle*. In other instances, the protagonists are marginally middle class, such as the insurance agent Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* (1944). These protagonists often eschew domesticity and inhabit claustrophobic urban environments. The films under discussion in this thesis all feature blue-collar protagonists who fit this description. They include the 1948 boxing-drama *Body and Soul* (1947), the blaxploitation films *Superfly* (1972) and *The Mack* (1973), and two “Hollywood Renaissance” noirs directed by Martin Scorsese, *Mean Streets* (1973) and *Taxi Driver* (1976).

For the purposes of this thesis, therefore, a film noir is a criminal melodrama which features a psychologically troubled working-class protagonist. These films, including all of the case studies used here, often contain many of the visual elements listed above, which are, as Place and Peterson argue, used to supplement the noir narrative by conveying “moods of claustrophobia, paranoia, despair, and nihilism,” or of “cynicism, pessimism and darkness.”¹² This very mood reflects and accentuates the troubled psychologically state of the noir protagonist, who, in classical film noir, is

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹¹ Schrader, “Notes on Film Noir,” p. 11.

¹² Place and Peterson, “Some Visual Motifs,” p. 65; Schrader, “Notes on Film Noir,” p. 8.

depicted as being sympathetic towards blacks, and who, in neo-noirs of the 1970s, is regularly at odds with African Americans.

Classical film noir, according to Paul Schrader, had a definitive beginning and end, bookended by *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Touch of Evil* (1958). By the mid-1950s, he points out, the nature of the melodrama changed again. The setting was changed from the city to the suburbs, criminals became more sophisticated, and the “footstore cop” was “replaced by the ‘mobile unit’.”¹³ Richard Martin notes that, by the late 1950s, what started as the “qualities of difference associated with classical film noir became gradually institutionalized” throughout the industry. It had also made its way to television in several shows such as *Dragnet* and *The Fugitive*. Since noir thrillers had, by this time, become common on TV, and because the studios were now trying to distinguish their products from that of television, they lost interest in producing film noir.¹⁴ Other factors which led to a reduction in the number noirs being produced include the scaling back of double-bills and the illegality of block booking and blind buying.¹⁵ Since noirs were, with some exceptions, generally low-budget films, they would become a rare breed by the mid-1950s, a time when the studios were primarily producing big-budget spectacles.

Lee Horsley notes that there was a revival in noir filmmaking towards the end of the sixties, brought about, like the original cycle, by a growing sense of cynicism and anxiety throughout American society. She claims that “tensions, doubts, failures and signs

¹³ Schrader, “Notes on Film Noir,” p. 12.

¹⁴ Richard Martin, *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls* (Langham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997), pp. 16-18.

¹⁵ A double-bill was a show featuring two films played back-to-back, usually a low budget film followed by a prestige picture. Block booking and blind buying refers to the practice of forcing independent exhibitors to rent packages of films, including films of lesser quality, if they wanted to acquire the more desirable products.

of dissent gathered” throughout the country due to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Kennedys, the Vietnam War, rising unemployment and crime rates, as well as the Watergate scandal. These events acted together to "undermined confidence" across America.¹⁶ It is also true, as the following chapters will make clear, that young filmmakers of the 1970s were heavily influenced by classical film noirs, so their films often resembled noirs from that period. Indeed, in 1972, Schrader observed that “Hollywood’s film noir has... become the subject of renewed interest among moviegoers and critics. The fascination film noir holds for today’s young filmgoers and film students,” he continues, “reflect recent trends in American cinema: American movies are again taking a look at the underside of the American character.”¹⁷

Both classical and neo-noir share similar stylistic techniques and, as Horsley suggests, both seem to have been brought about by a nation-wide mood of despair. Film noir from both periods, according to Naremore, “[offer] its mostly white audience the pleasure of ‘low’ adventure.... The dangers that assail the protagonist,” he continues, “arise from a modern, highly organized society, but a society that has been transformed into an almost mythical 'bad place', where the forces of rationality and progress seem vulnerable to corruption, and where characters on the margins of the middle class encounter a variety of 'others': not savages, but criminals, sexual independent women, homosexuals, Asians, Latins, and black people.”¹⁸ The topic of race in film noir, Naremore claims, has not been explored adequately. While he discusses the subject

¹⁶ Lee Horsley, “The Development of Post-war Literary and Cinematic Film Noir,” *Crime Culture*, accessed June 10, 2013, available from <http://www.crimeculture.com/Contents/NeoNoir.html>.

¹⁷ Schrader, “Notes on Film Noir,” p. 8.

¹⁸ Naremore, *More Than Night*, p. 220

briefly, he admits that his discussion is limited and that there is a “need for further work by other writers.”¹⁹ This thesis will provide insight into depictions of race relations in film noir, with specific attention to interactions between white working-class and African-Americans characters.

It is not uncommon for working-class, white male protagonists of classical film noir to interact with African-American characters, and when they do there is rarely any racial antagonism. In fact, the white lead is often depicted as being comfortable in traditional African-American milieus. For instance, Mike Hammer, in *Kiss Me, Deadly* (1955), frequents boxing gyms and jazz clubs where he has black friends and acquaintances. Similarly, in *Out of the Past* (1947), Jeff Bailey, “the white male protagonist,” patronizes a jazz club where he “and blacks interact as social equals.”²⁰ Other times the interactions are very brief, like the encounter between Walter Neff and the black valet in *Double Indemnity*. Alternatively, the interactions may be more significant and obvious, like the friendship between white fishing boat captain Harry Morgan and his African-American first mate Wesley in *Breaking Point* (1950). All of these interactions are significant because many films of the same era depicted the white man as oppressor to blacks. Furthermore, this was a trend in classical film noir which would be reversed in neo-noirs.

While noirs of the 1970s usually feature the same types of working-class protagonists, they do not interact in the same manner with African Americans as their classical noir predecessors. In neo-noirs, these interactions are primarily marked by

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

²⁰ Jans B. Wager, “Jazz and Cocktails: Reassessing the White and Black Mix in Film Noir,” *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 35, no.3 (July, 2007), p. 224.

antagonism and violence. Consider, for example, the encounter between Jimmy “Popeye” Doyle and African-American hoods in *The French Connection* (1971), in which Doyle violently attacks a black drug pusher. When they do not interact directly, the noir protagonist or others who exist in his social circle often talk in a derogatory manner when referring to African Americans, as they do in *Mean Streets* or *Farewell, My Lovely*.²¹ The reason for this change is complex and requires an examination of labour relations in Hollywood, the influence of interest groups and censors on the content of Hollywood films, and the financial history of the film industry, which was itself affected by changing demographics and other social phenomena throughout the country.²²

During the classical noir period, most left-leaning filmmakers championed equal rights for racial minorities. These filmmakers were also embroiled in a fierce struggle with studio management and with anti-communists in the federal government, and they found themselves allied with Hollywood workers in that struggle. Both their anti-capitalist and anti-racist beliefs were imprinted on their sympathetic working-class protagonists. The Bob Roberts/John Garfield production, *Body and Soul* (1948), will serve as an example of a film which was the product of filmmakers who sympathized with the working class, disliked capitalist practices, and were interested in racial equality.

²¹ In this film Marlowe, unlike in the novel, refrains from using racially derogatory terms when speaking about African Americans, though other working-class characters in the film do so liberally. However, this film does contain one scene from the book which was omitted from the 1944 film, in which Marlowe and his client, Moose Malloy, enter an African-American night club. Malloy kills the black owner of the club, and Marlowe seems completely unmoved by the violent event. He even proceeds to make jokes and drink the dead man’s liquor.

²² While this thesis provides three reasons for the changing depictions of race relations in film noir, it does not claim to provide a definitive list. Other reasons may exist which explain this phenomenon. Furthermore, this thesis could not take into account every film which falls into the noir or neo-noir category, so case studies have been chosen as examples. These particular films were chosen because they clearly illustrate each of the main ideas presented in this thesis, and because there is sufficient recorded evidence available in the form of interviews, correspondences, etc., regarding each film.

By the end of the 1940s, the American film industry was experiencing financial difficulties, brought about by a decreasing demand for movies and several legal and societal changes. These circumstances caused a complete restructuring of the film industry and a desperate search for a way to draw audiences back into movie theatres. By the 1970s, a new generation of directors had gained more autonomy than any generation that came before it. These filmmakers were no longer allied with the working class, as their predecessors had been in the 1940s.²³ There are three specific reasons for the changing depiction of race relations in film noir which were brought about primarily as a result of these circumstances. These three reasons are the crux of the argument presented in this thesis.

Firstly, in an effort to find a new audience, Hollywood executives specifically targeted urban African-American youths for the very first time. Studios hired African-American filmmakers to make films with primarily black casts as a selling point. Many of these films were cheaply-made crime dramas, in the style of film noir. They featured strong African-American protagonists who were not afraid to speak out against the white establishment. Secondly, many of the new directors that had come to prominence in the 1970s had studied in film schools and were influenced by European filmmakers who made realistic and personal or semi-autobiographic films. They were also influenced by classical film noir. Some of these filmmakers had grown up in racist communities, and because they wished to make personal and realistic films, the real-life racism that they had experienced made its way into their narratives, which were often visually and

²³ Derek Nystrom, "Hard Hats and Movie Brats: Auteurism and the Class Politics of the New Hollywood," *Cinema Journal*, vol. 43, no. 3 (Spring, 2014), pp. 29-30.

thematically similar to noirs of the 1940s and 50s.

Lastly, screenwriter Paul Schrader and his script for *Taxi Driver* will be used to help explain how filmmakers used working-class characters to help relieve feelings of anxiety, brought about in part by an awareness of their own racist tendencies. Racism had become socially unacceptable in middle-class society by the 1970s. Some middle-class people who had racist thoughts or supported racist policies found ways to deny their racism and to appear tolerant, thus escaping the negative stigma attached to their racist beliefs. In the political sphere, this could be done by adopting principles like colour-blindness.²⁴ Some, like Schrader, did so by engaging in reaction formation. By his own admission, Schrader created Travis, a violent working-class bigot, as a means of purging himself of negative thoughts. Schrader outwardly discredited his subject's violence and racism, thus appearing to hold the exact opposite opinions and values of his working-class creation. Schrader was thus able to relieve his own guilt about his own racism.

Therefore, briefly, it was a desire to take advantage of the young, urban African-American audience, a tendency toward realistic filmmaking, and the use of film as a medium for expressing and relieving anxieties, which accounted for changing depictions of race relations in the films noir under examination here. It should be recognized, however, that without those changes which took place within the industry between the two noir cycles, none of these neo-noirs would ever have been made. So, Hollywood's dire financial situation and its subsequent search for a new audience were the most important reasons for the changes in the way race relations were depicted in film noir.

²⁴ This is a concept which denies that race should be taken into account by decision-makers in professional or education spheres. People who adopt such views dismiss policies which allow minorities better opportunities in workplaces or in schools.

In regards to the secondary material used in this study, only Robert Sklar's *Movie Made America* touches on (almost) all relevant topics in this thesis, if only briefly. There have been several excellent surveys written about African Americans in Hollywood films. Thomas Cripps has written two monographs and one article on the depictions of blacks in American cinema. Both his book *Making Movies Black*, which takes as its time frame the postwar period, and his article "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song and the Changing Politics of Genre Film," which examines blaxploitation films of the 1970s, will be used in this thesis. Thomas Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, which examines the persistent use of stereotypes throughout the history of the industry, and Paula J. Massood's *Black City Cinema*, which focuses on African Americans in an urban setting,²⁵ will also be used extensively. Each of these authors recognizes that in the 1970s Hollywood executives began to target the urban African-American audience for the first time, leading to changes in the way that black protagonists were portrayed.²⁶ This thesis agrees with these authors but, unlike them, will discuss this phenomenon in relation to neo-noir blaxploitation films specifically.

In regards to works focusing on the working-class image in Hollywood films,

²⁵ Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994); Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie From World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Thomas Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 2006); Paula J. Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

²⁶ While each scholar reaches this conclusion, their arguments differ in their use of evidence. Cripps takes a historian's approach to the subject. According to one commentator, in fact, he spent "[n]early thirty years of research in libraries throughout [America] and Europe and many hours interviewing filmmakers." Bogle, on the other hand, relies almost entirely on an interpretation of the film text. Massood's method lies somewhere between, as she "relies mostly on textual analysis, and points to policies and populations shifts for context;" John J. Wiseman, "Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era by Thomas Cripps," *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 60, no. 4 (November, 1994), p. 838; Jennifer Fuller, "Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experience in Film by Paula J. Massood," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 4 (Summer, 2004), p. 48.

John Bodnar's *Blue-Collar Hollywood*, which covers the subject from the beginning of the sound period to the 1980s, is perhaps the most comprehensive. William Puette's *Through Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media View Organized Labor*, focuses on the image of labour in American media, and has a similar breadth to Bodnar's study, but Puette discusses film in only one short chapter. Steven J. Ross has written on the topic, but he focuses on the silent era, while Derek Nystrom and Robert A. Marcink cover the 1970s specifically.²⁷ Bodnar argues that in the 1970s filmmakers gained more freedom to express their opinions about American society and to portray their own personal experiences on screen.²⁸ Marcink argues that "Hollywood" recognized the potential in making films targeting the working class and a middle class that was growing increasingly conservative in the 1970s, leading them to depict conservative working-class characters. Nystrom, however, takes a closer look at the psychological condition of the filmmakers, and argues that depictions of working-class characters in the 1970s reveal much about the inner anxieties of their middle-class creators. This thesis rejects Marcink's argument but agrees with Bodnar's main argument, though it will disagree with his interpretation of certain films, like *Taxi Driver*. Nystrom's argument is expanded upon in the final chapter.

In terms of literature available on film noir, while many studies exist, as Dennis

²⁷ John Bodnar, *Blue-Collar Hollywood: Liberalism, Democracy and Working People in American Film* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003); William J. Puette, *Through Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media Viewed Organized Labour* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 1992); Steven J. Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Films and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Derek Nystrom, *Hard Hats, Rednecks, and Macho Men: Class in 1970s American Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Robert A. Marcink, *The Working Class in American Film: The Creation of Image and Culture by Hollywood in the 1960s and 1970s* (Amherst, MA: Cambria Press, 2011).

²⁸ For instance, according to Bodnar, working-class characters like Travis Bickle were forced to act out violently to clean up a morally and politically degraded society. Bodnar, *Blue-Collar Hollywood*, p. 186.

Broe points out, in those studies class "is cited only sporadically as having at least a tangential relation to film noir."²⁹ Still, there have been several articles and books published dealing with the Hollywood Left, the most influential filmmakers involved in classical film noir. Some of these studies deal with the political messages inserted into the films by their makers. Thom Andersen began the discussion in 1985. Other scholars have since expanded on his observations, including Michael Denning, Joshua Hirsch, Gene Michaud, Paul Buhle and David Wagner, James Naremore, and Dominique Brégent-Heald. Dennis Broe's *Film Noir, American Workers and Postwar Hollywood* is the most comprehensive study of class and classical film noir yet published.³⁰

There have been even fewer studies focusing specifically on how the ideologies of leftist filmmakers affected the depictions of race relations between African Americans and whites in film noirs. Brégent-Heald comes close, but she focuses on Chicanos instead of blacks. Eric Lott and Julian Murphet have written articles on the topic, and their arguments are contradictory to the one presented in this thesis, which uses a different methodological approach. This thesis attempts to balance the use of empirical evidence, along with secondary sources, with an examination of the film text. Lott and Murphet do not adequately examine empirical evidence and rely too strongly on their interpretation of

²⁹ Broe, *Film Noir*, p. xxv.

³⁰ Dennis Broe, *Film Noir, American Workers, and Postwar Hollywood* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2009); Thom Andersen, "Red Hollywood," in *Un-American Hollywood: Politics and Film in the Blacklist Era*, eds. Brian Neve and Frank Krutnik, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), pp. 225-263; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997); Joshua Hirsch, "Film Gris Reconsidered," *The Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 34, no. 2 (Summer, 2006), pp. 82-93; Gene Michaud, "Class Conflicts: Teaching the War Film," *Radical Teacher*, no. 50 (April, 1997), pp. 12-16; Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, *A Very Dangerous Citizen: Abraham Lincoln Polonsky and the Hollywood Left* (Berkeley University of California Press, 2001); Naremore, *More than Night*; Dominique Brégent-Heald, "Dark Limbo: Film Noir and the North American Borders," *Journal of American Culture*, 29, no. 2 (June, 2006), pp. 125-138.

the film text.

Eric Lott argues that in classical film noir, the deviant nature of African Americans and other racial minorities is suggested through their association with the immoral white protagonists. These films implied that deviance was not a natural trait of white people but that white protagonists became deviant only after shedding their “whiteness” and embracing racial “otherness.”³¹ Julian Murphet argues that in film noir, black/white racism was never shown directly but that evidence of racism can be found by looking under the surface of the film text. Noir filmmakers' repressed racism was expressed implicitly and unconsciously "in complex ways" through various aesthetic and narrative techniques, including the use of chiaroscuro lighting and choice of music. Interestingly, another way in which these filmmakers placed racism unconsciously into their films, according to Murphet, was through the very absence of African-American characters, which were omitted due to repression of their own negative thoughts about blacks.³² This is an unusual assertion, as African Americans were certainly not absent from these films, a fact which calls into question the validity of Murphet's argument.

Both Lott and Murphet agree that explicit racism was omitted from classical film noir. Their arguments, however, differ. Lott argues that it was through the friendly interactions between the marginal African-American characters and white protagonists that the implied racial superiority of white people was expressed. Murphet, on the other hand, argues that it was the lack of significant interactions between black and white characters that, in part, marked the unconscious racism of these films. I agree with both

³¹ Eric Lott, “The Whiteness of Film Noir,” *American Literary History*, vol. 9, no. 3 (Autumn, 1997), pp. 545-546.

³² Julian Murphet, “Film Noir and the Racial Unconscious,” *Screen*, vol. 39, no. 1 (Spring, 1998), p. 31.

scholars that overt racism was absent from classical film noir. However, I do not agree that there was any implicit racism expressed either consciously or subconsciously in these films.

To make their arguments, both Lott and Murphet point to the racial tensions which existed across American society and refer to the film text as evidence that racism was also present, implicitly, in the film noir of the 1940s. However, they only place the films in their social context and do not demonstrate how society affected the decisions of the filmmakers. No empirical evidence is presented, and they provide no evidence of authorial intention or any indication that the filmmakers may have been racists themselves. Admittedly, it would have been unlikely for any filmmaker to admit to making a racist film, and in the case of Murphet, who argues that the racism was not added consciously, filmmakers' statements of intent concerning this racial content would not likely exist. The empirical evidence which does exist, however, actually suggests that most classical noir filmmakers were advocates of racial equality.

Film scholar Steven J. Ross believes that film historians need to consider both film text and the context under which they were made. He argues that movies are made by real people who must make choices which affect the final film product. These might include decisions concerning the film plot, lighting, casting, dialogue, or any number of things. Filmmaker's judgements are affected by "the general climate of a society and the specific pressures within its film industry at a particular moment in time."³³ They could also make choices for ideological or moral reasons, so film historians must consider both

³³ Steven J. Ross, "Jargon and the Crisis of Readability: Methodology, Language, and the Future of Film History," *Cinema Journal*, vol. 44, no. 1 (Fall, 2004), p. 130.

social and personal factors affecting decision makers. This, however, raises the issue of determining who was responsible for making those decisions.

In the 1960s, a school of thought was advanced by film critic Andrew Sarris, who derived his ideas from earlier French critics, that skilful directors were the primary authors, or “auteurs,” of their films.³⁴ An auteurist’s approach to film history, therefore, would pay special attention to the intentions of the film director specifically. Sarris’s ideas were soon attacked by commentators who pointed out that commercial films are not the artistic product of a single person. They are a collaborative process involving many authorities whose opinions need to be taken into account.

There are other scholars who believe that filmmakers’ opinions and decisions should not be taken into account at all. In the 1960s and 1970s, cine-structuralists attempted to combine auteurism and structuralism. Inspired by the theories of Claude Levi-Strauss, cine-structuralists believed in examining film text only in order to reveal underlying structures which are “associated with a single director, an individual, not because he has played the role of artist, expressing himself or his vision in the film, but because it is through the force of his preoccupations that an unconscious, unintended meaning can be decoded in the film, usually to the surprise of the individual involved.” As the cine-structuralists saw it, because filmmakers were unaware of the meaning of their own work, their opinion about their films would have been of no use to those attempting to deconstruct them. Indeed, according to this theory,

[t]he film is not a communication, but an artefact which is unconsciously structured in a certain way. Auteur analysis does not consist of re-tracing a

³⁴ Andrew Sarris, “Notes on Auteur Theory in 1962,” in *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing: 2008), pp. 35-46.

film to its origins, to its creative source. It consists of tracing a structure (not a message) within the work, which can then post factum be assigned to an individual, the director, on empirical grounds.³⁵

This method of studying film, therefore, while it treats the director as author, rejects any interpretation based the director's opinions of their own work.

This thesis takes a middle ground in its approach, following Robert Spadoni's recognition that some individuals have more authority than others at certain points in the filmmaking process. Primary sources can be used to demonstrate that filmmakers had specific intentions which may or may not have been realized on the screen. No individual can be said to be the author of any commercial film, but specific individuals could have contributed more fully to the final product than others. This, Spadoni argues, is an important truth which must be recognized by historians as they conduct their research.³⁶ Through empirical evidence, such as interviews, correspondence, memos, or diaries, we can determine who had such authority, and through the same types of evidence we can understand, to an extent, why they made certain decisions and why their films turned out the way that they did.

Interviews and memos, however, cannot reveal all. Filmmakers and industry authorities might have lied, forgotten pieces of information, or some important information might never have been recorded. Furthermore, the filmmakers, as the cine-structuralists suggest, may also have added things to their films unconsciously. Reading the film text, therefore, is necessary as a complement to empirical evidence. Indeed, as

³⁵ Brian Henderson, "Critique of Cine-Structuralism (Part 1)," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 1 (Autumn, 1973), p. 31.

³⁶ Robert Spadoni, "Geniuses of the System: Authorship and Evidence in Classical Hollywood Cinema," *Film History*, vol. 7, no. 4 (Winter, 1995), p. 362-364.

Ross points out, it is important to deconstruct and analyze films by observing “how filmmakers use editing, lighting, costuming, casting, choreography, makeup, and other techniques” to express themselves.³⁷

To comprehend fully the reasons for the changing representation of race relations in film noir, it is important to understand the nature and impact of certain institutions both within and outside of Hollywood, and the influence they had over film content. We must remember that the Hollywood film industry is a business, composed of a number of entities in competition with one another whose aim is to achieve one thing above all: to make money. Since film studios have always been primarily concerned with making a profit, they are perpetually interested in drawing as many spectators to the movie theatres as possible. In order to do so, the studios wish to avoid controversial films which might alienate a portion of their potential audience.³⁸ It is not surprising, therefore, that when an interest group or segment of society speaks out against film content, Hollywood executives are often willing to listen and, if need be, to make changes to accommodate those groups.

The Hollywood film industry reached maturity in the 1910s, at which time the production branch of the industry came to be centralized in Southern California.³⁹ At this time five major studios dominated film production: Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, Warner Brothers, Paramount, 20th Century Fox, and Radio-Keith-Orpheum. Each studio had a head of production who was responsible for several producers, who themselves were in

³⁷ Ross, “Jargon and the Crisis of Readability,” p. 130.

³⁸ Gregory Black, “Censorship: An Historical Interpretation,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, vol. 6, no. 1 (Fall, 1991), p. 168.

³⁹ Ross, “Beyond the Screen,” p. 35.

charge of several films. The head of production was answerable to the studio head, who in turn reported to the company president and board members located in New York City. The “Big Five” were vertically integrated, controlling the production, distribution, and exhibition of their films. They each owned the filmmaking equipment, as well as the lots and stages to shoot their films, and had actors and filmmakers under contract.⁴⁰

These studios also owned their own theatres, guaranteeing that their films would always have a way of reaching audiences. They also rented movies to each other and to independent theatres. When they did so, they engaged in the practices of block booking and blind buying.⁴¹ Three other studios, the major-minors, controlled only the production and distribution of their products. These were Columbia, United Artists, and Universal. This is the system that was in place until the Paramount Divorcement Decree in 1948, which forced the studios to give up their theatres, to discontinue block booking, and to rent each film on its own merit.⁴² The Decree and its consequences played a significant role in depictions of race relations in film noir.

It is also important to understand the repercussions connected with the establishment, and eventual disbandment, of the Production Code Administration and the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). These were set up in 1934 to please society’s “moral guardians” and limited what could be portrayed on

⁴⁰ Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, pp. 232, 233.

⁴¹ See note 15.

⁴² For more information on the studio system, see David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thomsson, *The Classic Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985); Janet Staiger, “Dividing Labor for Production Control: Thomas Ince and the Rise of the Studio System,” *Cinema Journal*, vol. 18, no. 2 (Spring, 1979), pp. 16-25; Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996).

screen.⁴³ The aim of the MPPDA was to censor “pejorative reference to all national, ethnic, and racial groups... in search of a harmonious monochrome movie culture that diluted cultural density and muted political debate.”⁴⁴ While the studios found ways to continue depicting violence and other forms of vice onscreen, Hollywood now had to take seriously the opinion of the censors and make sure that their films were accepted by the MPPDA if they were to have them distributed. This system of censorship governed movie content for the next 33 years.

Studios tended to avoid making films about militant workers or about union activity during the Depression years.⁴⁵ However, implicit messages about the failings of capitalism and the American Dream could still be found in Hollywood films. Most notable were those about gangsters or boxers who had to take extraordinary measures to climb out of the gutter.⁴⁶ These films could be read as allegories for the failure of the American Dream and the falsehood of the Horatio Alger myth—that is, the capability of the lower classes to rise out of the ghetto simply by applying themselves and working hard.⁴⁷ Still, their messages were never explicit, and films about real labour struggles

⁴³ Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, pp. 18-19, 30-33; For an excellent example of one “moral guardian’s” opinion about Hollywood see Ed Roberts, *The Sins of Hollywood: An Expose of Movie Vice* (New York: Hollywood Publishing Co., 1922), p. 8.

⁴⁴ Cripps, *Making Movies Black*, p.4; John Springhall, “Censoring Hollywood: Youth, Moral Panic and Crime/Gangster Movies of the 1930s,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 32, no. 3 (Winter, 1998), p. 145.

⁴⁵ At this time studio bosses were resisting efforts by labourers to form unions so were reluctant to show the plight of the labourer on screen. See Terry Christensen and Peter J. Haas, *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films* (New York: M.E. Sharp, Inc., 2005), p. 82.

⁴⁶ Bodnar, *Blue-Collar Hollywood*, p. 1; Peter Stanfield disagrees with Bodnar. He believes that boxing films of the 1930s actually “downplayed or avoided the issue of moral and economic struggle.” I agree with Bodnar, that such messages were likely present, but implicitly. See Stanfield, “A Monarch for the Millions: Jewish Filmmakers, Social Commentary and the Postwar Cycle of Boxing Films,” *Film Studies*, no. 7 (Winter, 2005), p. 68.

⁴⁷ See chapter one of Bodnar, *Blue Collar Hollywood*, and Arthur Sacks, “An Analysis of the Gangster Movies of the 1930s,” *Velvet Light Trap*, vol. 1 (June, 1971), pp. 24-32, and Chapter 11 of Sklar, *Movie-Made America*; Occasionally, Hollywood films did contain messages about workers coming together to

were rare. This is not surprising given that the Production Code stated that movies should be primarily for entertainment purposes, “without any explicit purpose of teaching propaganda.”⁴⁸

While working-class issues were largely absent from Hollywood films in the 1930s, stories featuring African-American protagonists were virtually non-existent.⁴⁹ Blacks were primarily relegated to servile roles, such as cooks, maids, and butlers. While these characters were never portrayed as social equals in their interactions with whites, they were often depicted as being great companions to their employers. Consider, for instance, Bill Robinson's role as the tap-dancing butler in several Shirley Temple films such as *The Little Colonel* (1935). So working-class protagonists and African-American characters in Depression era films existed in different spheres. African Americans tended mostly to interact with upper-class white characters for whom they worked.

Hollywood films produced during World War II largely promoted unity and the homogeneity of the American people. Different races, classes, genders, ethnicities, etc., were shown coming together, living in harmony, or fighting together for the greater good of democracy and freedom. The Federal Government wanted to use Hollywood as an unofficial propaganda tool. In the spring of 1942, the government created a branch of the Office of War Information (OWI) called the Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP). This organization was to assist the motion picture industry in creating movies detailing “the

fight corruption, as they did in the 1938 film *Racket Busters*, but such films were rare. For additional information see Brian Neve, “The Hollywood Left: Robert Rossen and Postwar Hollywood,” *Film Studies*, no. 7 (Winter 2005), pp. 54-65.

⁴⁸ *The Motion Picture Production Code*, 1930, accessed June 7, 2013, available from <http://www.artsreformation.com/a001/hays-code.html>.

⁴⁹ There was, however, an independent black film industry in the prewar period, though it was in decline in the 1930s.

many problems attendant on the war program.”⁵⁰ While the studios were not obligated to heed the BMP's advice, government officials were often present at the studios, where they gave advice on scripts.⁵¹

Almost no films released during the war portrayed class or racial conflict. In general, critiques of capitalism and pessimistic tales of gangsters and boxers were no longer common. Messages about democracy and unity became the norm.⁵² In fact, the government issued the Manual for the Motion Picture Industry, which encouraged the studios to produce films which showed labour in cooperation with management. “Past grievances must be forgotten,” it advised, “in the urgent necessity to present a solid, militant front against the common enemy.” Americans were expected to go overseas and fight, to give up certain privileges at home and in the workplace, to “become a team player,” and to do “whatever it took to win the war,” and Hollywood would play its part in advancing this idea. Labour organizations heeded this call throughout the country, as many unions agreed to a no-strike pledge, at least at the start of the war.⁵³

Despite Hollywood's efforts to present a better image of African Americans, many activists believed that much work was left to be done, as blacks were still only given the

⁵⁰ Bureau of Motion Pictures, *Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry* (Washington, D.C.: Office of War Information, 1942): p. 1.

⁵¹ Edward Sorrel, “Casablanca,” *American Heritage*, vol. 42, no. 8 (December, 1991), accessed June 10, 2013, available from <http://www.americanheritage.com/content/casablanca>. For more information on the way Hollywood officials responded to the war and to the government's call for films about class and racial harmony, see Nancy Snow, “Hollywood Confessions of A Hollywood Propagandist: Harry Warner, FDR and Celluloid Persuasion,” in *Warner's War: Politics, Pop Culture, and Wartime Propaganda*, p. 63, available from <http://www.learcenter.org/pdf/WWSnow.pdf>; *You Must Remember This*, directed by Richard Schickel (Beverly Hills, CA: Lorac Productions, 2008); “Motion Pictures Have No Room for Propaganda, Hays Declares,” *The Era*, Bradford, PA, July 21, 1941; Thomas Cripps and David Culbert, “*The Negro Soldier* (1944): Film Propaganda in Black and White,” *American Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 5 (Winter, 1979), pp. 616-640; and Brian Locke, “Strange Fruit: White, Black and Asian in the World War II Combat Film Bataan,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 36, no. 1 (Spring, 2008): pp. 9-20.

⁵² Bodnar, *Blue-Collar Hollywood*, pp. 55, 56.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

opportunity to play secondary roles. Indeed, there were conservatives working in Hollywood just as there were liberals. Since the OWI's recommendations to Hollywood were only suggestions, the industry was not entirely restricted from producing films which did not reflect the BMP's goal of "fighting for freedom and against slavery," nor where they obligated to heed the BMP's advice to make films which suggested that African Americans had a "real, a legal, and a permanent chance for improvement of their statuses."⁵⁴

On the whole, however, images of African Americans in Hollywood films during the war years improved relative to such depictions of the 1920s and 1930s. Hattie McDaniel perhaps put it best in 1943: "I know there is much room for improvement, but having been part and parcel of this industry... I have seen great strides being made." She went on to note that only a decade earlier opportunities for African-American actors in Hollywood had been minimal, but that "today many get very good parts," and "colored are being used in large numbers in many sequences." She also noted that, since being offered more significant roles, her treatment on set was much the same as that of any other Hollywood star, with her own dressing room, hairdressers, caterers, etc.⁵⁵ The image of African Americans in Hollywood films and their position in the industry had certainly gotten better, even if there was still much room for improvement.

While films produced during World War II portrayed positive relations between whites and blacks, in reality this was not the case throughout the country. The racially integrated platoons in films such as *Bataan* (1943) were outright Hollywood fantasies.

⁵⁴ Sorrel, "Casablanca."

⁵⁵ "Our Leading Movie Artists Air Views at Afro Roundtable," *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 9, 1943, n.p.

The army had a strict policy of segregation,⁵⁶ and even segregation did not stop racial tensions in the Armed Forces.⁵⁷ Furthermore, racial tensions between working-class males and blacks on the civilian homefront actually intensified throughout the country during the war. This was due primarily to the threat, perceived by white workers, that African Americans were not only taking their jobs, but were also competing for housing and political influence as they moved North to work in the factories to take advantage of the wartime boom in manufacturing.⁵⁸

So, when the studio system was first established the working class and its issues tended not to be addressed directly. Instead, especially in the 1930s, the plight of the worker was inferred through stories about boxers and gangsters. During this same decade, African Americans were relegated to roles as servants to upper-class whites and, therefore, rarely interacted with white, working-class characters. During World War II, all races and classes were depicted as part of a single, united America. Throughout the country racial tensions may have remained high, but in the movies they were not. In the classical film noir of the postwar period, positive race relations would persist, as harmony between blacks and whites was a prominent feature of the cycle. By the 1970s, however, racial tensions became the norm in New Hollywood noirs. The reasons for this change will be

⁵⁶ Lauren Rebecca Sklarnof, *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. 223.

⁵⁷ For information on racial tension in the armed forces during World War II see Ulysses Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops: Special Studies* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, U.S. Army, 1966).

⁵⁸ For more information on racial tension on the homefront, see William J. Collins, "Race, Roosevelt, and Wartime Production: Fair Employment in World War II Labor Markets," *The American Economic Review*, vol. 91, no. 1 (March, 2001), pp. 272- 286; Harvard Sitkoff, "Racial Militancy and Interracial Violence in the Second World War," *The Journal of American History*, vol. 58, no. 3 (December, 1971), pp. 661-681; Dominique J. Capeci, "The Lynching of Cleo Write: Federal Protection of Constitutional Rights During World War II," *The Journal of American History*, vol. 72, no. 4 (March, 1986), pp. 859-887.

addressed in the following four chapters.

Chapter one will examine the state of the industry in the immediate postwar period, with special attention given to leftist filmmakers, their ideologies, and their persecution by the American government and the studio bosses. It will go on to explain how those circumstance led to the depiction of white working-class protagonists in film noir, who were, almost without fail, sympathetic towards African-American characters. *Body and Soul* will be used as an example of a film featuring such a protagonist. Chapter two considers the rise of blaxploitation films of the early 1970s. It explains how an effort to target urban African-American youth led to representations of black working-class protagonists in blaxploitation noirs, and why their relationship with white characters in those films were antagonistic, as it was in *Superfly* and *The Mack*. Chapter three will focus on the tendency towards realistic filmmaking by New Hollywood directors. It will show how that tendency led to depictions of white and black antagonism in films of the 1970s, with specific reference to Martin Scorsese's neo-noir, *Mean Streets*. Chapter four explains how, in the case of Paul Schrader, white middle-class anxiety, brought about in part by an awareness of his own racist tendencies, led him to depict a racist, white working-class protagonist in *Taxi Driver*.

Chapter 1: The Hollywood Left and *Body and Soul*(1947)

In the influential article "Red Hollywood," published in 1985, Thom Andersen argues that in the postwar period a group of Hollywood "Browderite communists and left-liberals" produced a number of "politically distinctive" films which reflected their political ideologies. The films he identifies are all film noir, but were distinguishable from other noirs by their "greater psychological and social realism." Andersen argues that these films actually constitute an entirely separate genre which he labels "film gris." These films were pessimistic in tone, presented instances of "poverty and class conflict," and featured working-class protagonists.¹

While Andersen states that film gris "grew out of the body of films that have come retrospectively to be called film noirs," he does not say what he considers film noir to be. He simply says that films gris were distinguishable from film noir due to their psychological and social realism. For the purposes of this thesis, however, an emphasis on the psychological condition of the protagonists is an essential element of film noir. What Andersen considers to be film gris, therefore, seems to be exactly what this thesis considers to be film noir, and some films which he considers to be film noir may not fit the more restrictive definition given here.² This thesis agrees with Andersen's assessment of film noir/gris and will expand upon it by examining how those

¹Earl Browder was the leader of the American Communist Party from 1930-1945; Andersen, "Red Hollywood," p. 257.

²For an analysis of, and update, on Andersen's article see Joshua Hirsch, "Film Gris Reconsidered," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 34, no. 2 (Summer, 2006), pp. 83-84; Andersen, "Red Hollywood," p. 257.

“Browderite communists and left-liberals” who made film noir chose to portray race relations in their films.

This chapter explains how the intersection of two particular ideological beliefs held by noir filmmakers led to the creation of working-class protagonists who sympathized with African Americans. First, these filmmakers held hostile views of capitalism and sympathized with the working class. Many of their films served as allegories or political statements concerning the evils of the capitalist system. Their heroes were often proletariats, who were embroiled in struggles against representatives of capitalism. Second, many of these same filmmakers also held strong views about racism and its negative effects on society. African-American characters were treated with respect by the sympathetic white working-class protagonists when they were featured in film noir. It was this fusion of anti-capitalism and anti-racism which led to the lack of visible racial tension between the working-class protagonists and African-American characters in film noir, a dynamic which is especially evident in the film which Andersen called the first film gris, *Body and Soul*.

Body and Soul was the product of several Hollywood leftists, notably Abraham Polonsky, who wrote the screenplay, and John Garfield, who produced and starred in the film. The film is about a white ethnic boxer, Charlie, played by Garfield himself. Charlie sees boxing as a means to upward mobility. He eventually gets involved with a corrupt, mob-affiliated promoter, who encourages him in his desperate pursuit of success and wealth. Charlie's desire to become wealthy at any cost causes him to alienate himself from his best friend, his mother, and his fiancée. Once he realizes the cost of his greed, he falls into a state of anxiety. Charlie redeems himself in the end when he chooses not to

throw his final fight as champion of the world, which would have set him up financially for life. Instead, he chooses to fight to the bitter end and to keep his dignity.

Abraham Polonsky intended the film to be a metaphor for the evils of capitalism and the pursuit of wealth at all costs.³ Indeed, liberal-minded filmmakers tended to use crime films as an allegory for class tension and the evils of unfettered capitalism. Most often, however, the social commentary was implicit, not outright. This “disguised” message was necessary for several reasons. The studios had been hostile to union activity since the late 1910s, and studio bosses did not favor movies with a pro-labour message.⁴ Furthermore, with the fear of communism rising after the war, and leftists becoming increasingly targeted as subversives by the House Un-American Activities Committee and conservative Hollywood studio bosses, filmmakers needed to be cautious in the content of their films.⁵ If the studio bosses, or the PCA, interpreted a screenplay as being radical, those in charge at the studios would likely have had the offending content cut from the film. For that reason, artists who wanted to add "radical" content to their films had to do so in clever ways. As we will see, leftist political messages certainly were present, especially in film noir, which were not looked at too closely by the studios because they

³ Abraham Polonsky has said that “when you tell a story about boxing, corruption is always the main theme. If it’s successful, it’s the corruption of power. If it’s the use of money, it’s the corruption of what money buys.” See Polonsky, *Body and Soul*, p. 164.

⁴ Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood*, p. 134; While filmmakers were more sympathetic to the working-class in early Hollywood films, there were few instances of pro-unionism in films in the post-World War I period. It was organized labour, not the individual labourer, which was portrayed most negatively by the industry since the early twentieth century. See chapter 1 of Puette, *Through Jaundiced Eyes*, for a brief, but informative, discussion on this topic.

⁵ Broe, “Class, Crime, and Film Noir,” p. 28; Joshua Hirsch discusses the ways in which these filmmakers used metaphor, simile, and antiphrasis. See Joshua Hirsch, “*Film Gris* Reconsidered,” pp. 85-86; Peter Stanfield also makes this point in “Monarch for the Millions,” p. 68.

were often low-budget “B pictures,” not prestige-level material.⁶ While the primary social critique of these films was a critique of capitalism and the justice system, they also contained subtle messages about the evils of racism.

After the war, with the horrors of fascism and the holocaust fresh in the minds of many Americans, there was a growing sympathy among white middle-class liberals for African Americans and their fight for civil equality. At this time, as well, the NAACP created a bureau to monitor the content of Hollywood films and to make certain that they contained no racially offensive material.⁷ This led to a relative improvement in the image of African Americans in popular media compared to that of the prewar period. The studios now offered African Americans roles that were more serious and complex, notably in social problem films which dealt directly with the negative effects of racism. These films became so recognizable that in November 1949, the trade magazine *Variety* stated that “Film’s leading b.o. star for 1949 wasn’t a personality, but a subject matter. And a subject—racial prejudice—that until very recently was taboo.”⁸

Because social problem films were primarily about the hardships faced by African Americans due to racism, it was necessary to depict instances of racial antagonism. The racist characters in these films were, of course, portrayed in a negative light. Certainly, middle-class filmmakers and upper-class moguls would have no interest in tarnishing

⁶Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 86.

⁷For an account of the formation of this bureau see Thomas Cripps, “Walter’s Thing: The NAACP’s Hollywood Bureau of 1946—A Cautionary Tale,” *The Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 33, no. 2 (Summer, 2005): pp. 116-125.

⁸“\$20,000,000 Box Office Payoff for H’Wood Negro-Tolerance Pix,” *Variety*, November 30, 1949, pp. 1, 18. Quoted in John Nickel, “Disabling African-American Men: Liberalism and Race Message Films,” *Cinema Journal*, vol. 44, no.1 (Fall, 2004), p. 25.

their own image.⁹ It was, therefore, the working class, most often the Southern working-class, that was the source of racism in message films such as *Pinky* (1949) and *Intruder in the Dust* (1950). But Hollywood films of the immediate postwar period were not homogeneous in their depiction of the working class. While social problem films often presented the working class as repulsive bigots, other films portrayed them in a more positive manner.

After the war, the horrors of the holocaust and pressure from interest groups like the NAACP led Hollywood to avoid depicting racial minorities villainously. Indeed, notions of racial superiority were part of the Nazi ideology and led to the Holocaust. In this era, “class politics came to take a back seat to an increasing concern with ethnic and racial tolerance.” Nobody seemed to have been making an effort to prevent filmmakers from portraying the working class in any way they saw fit. Middle-class commentary on social problem films can be used as evidence of this. Mainstream movie critics applauded the message of tolerance in social problem films, but few panned filmmakers for depicting working-class white men as bigots.¹⁰

As with most films of the period outside of the social problem cycle, when African Americans appeared in film noir their characters were rarely integral to the plot. Because these were often crime films with implicit messages about the evils of unbridled capitalism, it made sense for their protagonists to be of the working class, but it was not

⁹Daryl Zanuck, after reading the first draft of *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), did not agree with the vilification of the mine owners in the script. He demanded that changes be made to the screenplay, stating that “I’ll be damned if I want to go around making the employer class out-and-out villains in this day and age.” See Francis R. Walsh, “The Films We Never Saw: American Movies View Organized Labor, 1934-1954,” *LaborHistory*, vol. 27, no. 4 (July, 1986), p. 571.

¹⁰Bodnar, *Blue-Collar Hollywood*, pp. 122, 131, 132.

necessary for them to be African Americans. When blacks did appear in classical film noir, therefore, it was often in menial roles such as service workers, like the janitors and valet from *Double Indemnity*(1944), or the gardener and maid from *In a Lonely Place*(1950). In other films they appeared as fighters and trainers in boxing gyms and arenas, as in *The Set-Up*(1949) and *Kiss Me Deadly*(1955). Most often, however, they appeared as musicians, bartenders, and patrons of jazz clubs, where, as Jans Wager points out, “[t]he white male protagonist and blacks interact as social equals.”¹¹ James Naremore also makes this connection. Naremore argues that Mike Hammer, the protagonist of *Kiss Me Deadly*, becomes “a relatively sympathetic embodiment of urban liberalism” because he fits in so well at a jazz club populated mainly by blacks.¹²

Many noir protagonists of this period, in fact, were associated with jazz music in some way. Since the 1920s, jazz has been equated with deviance, sexuality, and urbanism in the popular imagination, and those associated with jazz music, or the jazz “scene,” were often thought of as outsiders and romantics who rejected normalcy.¹³ Dennis Broe argues that the deviance inherent to the noir protagonists was the very trait which made

¹¹Wager, “Jazz and Cocktails,” p. 224.

¹² Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 224, originally from Naremore, *More Than Night*, p. 241.

¹³ See David Butler, *Jazz Noir: Listening to Music from Phantom Lady to The Last Seduction* (Westport: Praeger, 2002), p. 146; Douglas Field, “Even Better than the Real Thing: Boris Vian, Vernan Sullivan, and Film Noir,” *African American Review*, vol. 45, no. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 2012), pp. 157-166; Langston Hughes, “When the Negro was in Vogue,” in *Collected Work of Langston Hughes*, vol. 13; *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*, ed. Joseph McLaren (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), p. 177; Sean McCann, “Dark Passages: Jazz and Civil Liberty in the Postwar Crime Film,” in *Un-American Hollywood: Politics in the Blacklist Era*, eds. Steve Neale, Brian Neve, and Frank Krunik, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), pp. 113-129; Paul Lopes, “Signifying Deviance and Transgression: Jazz in the Popular Imagination,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 48, no. 11 (July, 2005): pp. 1468-1481; Vivian Sobchack, “Lounge Time: Postwar Crises and the Chronoscope of Film Noir,” in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998): pp. 129-170.

them attractive. He uses Eric Hobsbawm's *Bandits* to explain how the criminal protagonists of film noir symbolized resistance in the face of oppression. According to Broe, these men, like Hobsbawm's "social bandits," were meant to be viewed as heroes who fought against inequality and were intended to be admired because they took a stand against the corruption of the powers that be.¹⁴ Why these "Browderite communists and left-liberals" were interested in depicting blue-collar men in this fashion will be examined below. But first we must consider the social climate of the times, with special attention to the growing tide of labour unrest throughout the country and within Hollywood in particular.

Andersen suggests that the postwar political climate, both in Hollywood and throughout the country, was a leading cause of the particular thematic content of films *gris*. He suggests that the anti-communist fervor, which included an attack on organized labour and leftists more generally, led to a tumultuous atmosphere, providing incentive for leftist filmmakers to make political statements in their films. He suggests that HUAC was correct in its accusations that leftist filmmakers were injecting political content into their products. These filmmakers, in Andersen's view, knew they were on the brink of being shut out of Hollywood, so they decided to take a sort of last stand against the American capitalist system.¹⁵ Indeed, Abraham Polonsky, the writer of the *Body and Soul*, admits that he desired to make "socially significant" films.¹⁶

¹⁴Cited in Broe, "Class, Crime, and Film Noir," p. 25.

¹⁵ For a breakdown of Andersen's argument see Hirsch, "Film *Gris* Reconsidered," pp. 82, 84; Ceplair and Englund argue that many radical screenwriters saw themselves as "artists striving to improve their craft and their medium, struggling to express their views, and through their professional work, helping to change the way people thought." See Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-1960* (New York: Anchor Press, 1980), p. 300.

¹⁶Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, "Interview with Abraham Polonsky," in *Abraham Polonsky: Interviews*, ed.

The specifics of the political situation in Hollywood can help us better understand what motivated filmmakers like Polonsky and Garfield to express their political attitudes through the medium of film noir. Below is a discussion of Hollywood labour struggles and of the purging of leftist influences from the industry by HUAC and the subsequent blacklist by the studios. Both of these events were essentially two parts of a single struggle between left and right wing factions within Hollywood, with studio bosses, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), and the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) pitted against and the Conference of Studio Unions(CSU) and the Screen Writers Guild (SWG).¹⁷

The period between August 1945 and June 1946 was marked by a brief but intense period of labour turmoil.¹⁸ Several factors contributed to labour unrest in this period. For instance, many workers saw their income cut from fifteen to as much as thirty percent due to lack of overtime work available after the war. There were also many layoffs caused by the cancellation of government contracts.¹⁹ Both the government and union bosses were opposed to the strikes, many of which were carried out by rank-and-file union members who had become “more radical than their leaders.”²⁰ The government reacted first by calling on labour to continue to abide by the no-strike pledge. Labour responded by

Andrew Dickos (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013), p. 177.

¹⁷ See Peter Stead, *Film and the Working Class: The Feature Film in Britain and American Society* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 153; Ceplair and Englund point out that while the SWG was not inherently a leftists union, far left members of the guild, due to their “superior organization and devotion to unions often won for its chief spokespeople a disproportionate number of high Guild offices.” Ceplair and Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood*, p. 277.

¹⁸ Broe, “Class, Crime and Film Noir,” p. 28.

¹⁹ Broe, *Film Noir*, p. 32.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

officially rejecting the pledge in October 1945. President Truman threatened to draft the workers who refused to go back to work. Many workers gained concessions and wage increases, but they ultimately lost in their struggle with the federal government. A Republican Congress was elected in 1946 and passed legislation restricting the effectiveness of collective action by labour. Most significantly, in 1947 the government passed the Taft-Hartley Act, which outlawed union tactics such as jurisdictional and wildcat strikes, further limiting labour's ability to bargain collectively.²¹ The act also effectively strengthened the power of labour leaders over rank-and-file union members by giving those leaders the responsibility of enforcing the act.

Another way in which the federal government posed a threat to labour was through the House Un-American Activities Committee's communist witch-hunt. After World War II over one hundred congressional hearings took place, with the objective of routing communists from American labour organizations. Those who were called before HUAC and decided not to cooperate paid for it by losing their jobs and were often harassed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) or the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), which threatened to deport uncooperative unionists. To avoid controversy, labour organizations began enforcing the official line of the government, shutting down any militant action by their own members so that HUAC would not have a reason to come after them.²²

In the late 1940s, Hollywood became one of the primary battlegrounds in the fight

²¹ Broe, *Film Noir*, pp. 31-33; Broe, "Class, Crime, and Film Noir," p. 30.

²² Broe, *Film Noir*, p. 34, 81, 82.

between labour and anti-communists.²³ Anthony Dawson, writing in 1948 about the ongoing labour disputes in Hollywood, explains how in the postwar period the film industry had highly organized workforce, with forty-two unions by 1947. Both workers and professionals were unionized, and most unions were drawn together under umbrella organizations such as IATSE. Only the producers and high-level executives worked outside of organized labour. While Hollywood workers were generally well paid, their jobs were contracted and not permanent. Work, therefore, was not always consistent. Dawson explains how informal the structure was. He writes that “out of the forty-two trade unions whose contracts the writer has examined, the studio may hire members of forty of them without obligation to guarantee more than one day's employment.” There were, for instance, 1,300 writers competing for 200 jobs in the late 1940s. Similarly unpromising circumstances were a reality for actors, directors, and labourers alike.²⁴

Jurisdictional disputes among labour organizations were an ongoing problem for workers in Hollywood. With such an abundance of workers and a relative scarcity of work, various unions, even those represented under the same affiliation, competed with one another for jobs. Studio heads and high level executives often took advantage of the surplus labour; when workers decided to strike, studio bosses simply invited workers from different unions to take their place rather than negotiate with the striking unions.²⁵

The most significant jurisdictional dispute in Hollywood in the immediate postwar period involved one conservative union, IATSE, and a left-leaning union, the CSU, which

²³ Hirsch, "Film *Gris* Reconsidered," p. 86.

²⁴ Anthony A. P. Dawson, "Hollywood's Labor Troubles," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, vol. 1, no. 4 (July, 1948), pp. 639, 640.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 644, 645.

fought over the right to represent set decorators. This dispute led to three strikes starting in March 1945. The CSU was successful in the first two strikes, winning the right to represent set decorators as well as further concessions from the studios. However, the last strike, which began in September 1946, ultimately led to the demise of the CSU.²⁶

To settle the jurisdictional dispute, the president of IATSE appointed ardent anti-communist Roy Brewer as head of the Hollywood branch of the association. Helped by a conservative Hollywood organization known as the Motion Picture Alliance for Preservation of American Values (MPA), as well as the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), Brewer ran a successful propaganda campaign against the CSU. Brewer took advantage of the anti-communist sentiment which was growing throughout the country, winning over the public by portraying CSU members as communist agitators.²⁷ According to Sarah Cooper, the demise of the CSU marked the end of labour's struggle and a victory for their adversaries in Hollywood. It was also the beginning of the Hollywood blacklist, which would strengthen ties between workers and leftist filmmakers. This unofficial alliance contributed to the rise in depictions of sympathetic working-class protagonists in Hollywood criminal melodramas. One notable example is Charlie Davis, the protagonist of *Body and Soul*.²⁸

While the conservative SAG proved to be an enemy of the CSU, the much more

²⁶The AFL stepped in to end the first strike in October 1945, and acted as arbitrator between the studios and the unions who were unable to reach a compromise. The second strike took place in July 1946, and lasted only briefly before the studios agreed to union demands. See Laurie Caroline Pinter, "Herbert K. Sorrell as the Grade-B Hero: Militancy and Masculinity in the Studios," *Labor History*, vol. 77 (Summer, 1996), p. 414.

²⁷David F. Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour: Ideology and Democracy in the Screen Actors Guild* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), pp. 40, 43.

²⁸Sarah Cooper, "On the Archival Trial of the CIO and Hollywood's Labor Wars," *California History*, vol. 75, no. 1 (Spring, 1996): p. 36.

liberal Screen Writers Guild was sympathetic to its cause. Indeed, the SWG, like the CSU, would find itself in a heated battle both with conservative elements within Hollywood and with HUAC. During the second strike, the CSU had actually won concessions not only for craft workers but also for all Hollywood workers, including wage increases and reduced working hours. CSU leader Herbert Sorrel then showed interest in forming a large collective union to represent both Hollywood craft and creative workers. While this did not come to fruition, prominent SWG member Abraham Polonsky admitted that "[a] thriving CSU would have bolstered us tremendously."²⁹ Even if the SWG did not give official support to the CSU strikes, many members did so independently. In fact, Polonsky has said that aiding the CSU in its strike against the studios and right-wing influences was one way that Hollywood radicals worked towards "changing the world."³⁰ John Howard Lawson, founder and former president of the SWG, was actually present on the picket lines in 1945 to lend his personal support to the CSU.³¹ Indeed, Lawson and three other Hollywood creative workers who openly supported the CSU were among the first ten to be blacklisted by the major studios.³²

In 1945, the Chamber of Commerce declared that communists had infiltrated Hollywood and targeted the SWG as the primary source.³³ In May 1947, HUAC held

²⁹Broe, *Film Noir*, p. 36.

³⁰Buhle and Wagner, "Interview," p. 183.

³¹While the majority of the Screen Actors Guild were of a different opinion than men like Lawson, some actors, especially those formerly of the liberal Group Theatre in New York, lent their support to the CSU and Hollywood's working class. Elaine Spiro, "Hollywood Strike-October 1945: A Reminiscence," *Film History*, vol. 10, no. 3 (November, 1998), p. 417.

³²The others were Dalton Trumbo, Albert Maltz, and Adrien Scott. See Jon Lewis, "'We Do Not Ask You to Condone This': How the Blacklist Saved Hollywood," *Cinema Journal*, vol 39, no. 2 (Winter, 2000), p. 19.

³³Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, p. 257; John Howard Lawson was a member of both the SWG and the Los

closed-door hearings with the MPA and other “friendly witnesses” who named several Hollywood filmmakers they believed to be communists.³⁴ After these hearings, J. Parnell Thomas, the HUAC chairman, declared that communists “have employed subtle techniques in pictures in glorifying the Communist system and degrading our own system of Government and Institutions.”³⁵ On October 20, 1947, HUAC held public hearings in Washington, attended by the press, at which twenty-four “friendly” and eleven “unfriendly” witnesses were called to testify. The eleven “unfriendly witnesses” were suspected communists or communist sympathizers, and all but one was cited for contempt of congress for refusing to answer the Committee’s questions. These witnesses became known as the “Hollywood Ten.”

Reid Rosefelt suggests that Thomas, while he may indeed have feared a communist takeover of the film industry, likely initiated his Hollywood campaign for the publicity he believed it would garner for the Committee and its cause.³⁶ Broe, however, claims that the primary reason for intervention in Hollywood was to silence the Hollywood trade unions.³⁷ Richard Maltby points out that the “thrust of the [Committee's] accusations” was particularly “anti-New Deal.” Since the last “New Deal” union remaining in Hollywood after the dissolution of the CSU was the SWG, the Committee honed in on that guild specifically.³⁸ HUAC's investigations and its 1947

Angeles branch of the Communist Party USA.

³⁴ Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*, p. 52.

³⁵ Reid Rosefelt, “Celluloid Sedition?: The Strange Case of the Hollywood Ten,” *The Velvet Light Trap*, vol. 11 (Winter, 1974): p. 2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Broe, *Film Noir*, p. 37.

³⁸ Richard Maltby, “Made for Each Other: The Melodrama of Hollywood and the House Committee on Un-

hearings can, therefore, more accurately be described as anti-labour, rather than anti-communist, or as Broe puts it, “anti-labor in the guise of being anti-Communist.”³⁹ The Hollywood blacklist was essentially an extension of the conflict between labour and studio management which began in the immediate postwar period.

The contempt citation of the Hollywood Ten was upheld by the House of Representatives on November 27. On that day Hollywood studio bosses congregated at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City, where they decided that they would forthwith “discharge or suspend without compensation those in our employ, and we will not re-employ any of the 10 until such time as he is acquitted or has purged himself of contempt and declares under oath that he is not a Communist.”⁴⁰ Leftist unions and liberal filmmakers thus found themselves on the defensive against a similar enemy.

Moguls such as Louis B. Mayer of MGM and Jack Warner of Warner Brothers were happy to “name names.” Indeed, both studio bosses may have had personal vendettas against the unions, as they had to shut down production during the CSU strikes. The hearings provided them with a golden opportunity to rid themselves of labour annoyances, something that was becoming increasingly important at that time, as the studios were entering a period of financial turmoil. Studio bosses sometimes equated labour activism with communism. The SWG was even described as being “lousy

American Activities, 1947,” in *Cinema and Politics in America*, ed. Philip Davies and Brian Neve (New York: St Martin's Press, 1981), p. 84; “New Deal” unions were formed during the Great Depression, during President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal relief program. As part of his New Deal, Roosevelt signed several pieces of legislation granting unions more leverage over management.

³⁹ Broe, *Film Noir*, p. 84.

⁴⁰ Association of Motion Picture Producers, Motion Picture Association of America, and Society of Independent Motion Picture Producers, “Waldorf Statement,” 1947, in *McCarthyism and the Red Scare: A Reference Guide*, ed. William T. Walker (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011), pp. 136-137.

with Reds.”⁴¹ Similarly, Walt Disney, in his testimony to HUAC, labelled Herbert Sorrell a “Commie,” and stated that Communists “have been hiding behind this labour set up” and had been “closely tied up in the labor thing, so that if you try to get rid of them they make a labor case out of it.”⁴² Furthermore, the blacklist allowed studio heads to reduce the influence of independents and to downsize at a time when movie attendance was waning and they needed to save money.⁴³

Hollywood was clearly divided into two distinct camps in the late 1940s. On one side of the divide were leftist creative workers and labourers, and on the other, studio moguls, high-level executives, and anti-communist crusaders within the federal government. Some leftist filmmakers were aware that their days in Hollywood were numbered. While some conceded to pressure and named names in order to save their careers others, like Polonsky, decided to keep their dignity by refusing to cooperate with HUAC and were blacklisted as a result. But before they were denied access to work in Hollywood many cleverly wove political, anti-capitalist messages into their films as a sort of last stand, a final assault before their adversaries delivered the seemingly inevitable knock-out blow which would banish them from the industry for years to come.

After the war, many Americans expected films to give more realistic portrayals of life.⁴⁴ Movies, according to critic James Agree, were now expected to be “journalistic,

⁴¹ Ceplair and Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood*, p. 213.

⁴² Robert E. Stripling and H.A. Smith, “The Testimony of Walter E. Disney Before the House Committee on Un-American Activities,” in *Dr. Paul O'Neill Scholarship*, ed. Kathy Merlock Jackson (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2006), p. 37; see also Lewis, “We Do Not Ask,” p. 23.

⁴³ Broe, *Film Noir*, pp. 38, 39, 86.

⁴⁴ Donald Bogle suggests that “the postwar audience demanded recognizable problems and issues.” They “now wanted to be pounded over their heads with facts, with guts, with realism. And they were willing to

semi-documentary, and social minded.”⁴⁵ Crime films, especially gangster films of the 1930s, as we have seen, have a history of being used as social commentary, especially those made by left-leaning filmmakers who intended to discredit the American Dream and capitalism in general.⁴⁶ Andersen notes that makers of film gris often used their movies to demonstrate the fine line between criminality and capitalist business practises. Indeed, according to Charles Maland, the association of the bourgeoisie with criminal practices is a “hallmark of film gris.”⁴⁷ But while the studios allowed for certain issues, such as racism, to be portrayed explicitly, filmmakers had to be cautious when handling labour issues or else run the risk of being labeled as subversives.

Many of the filmmakers involved in film noir, including John Garfield, came to Hollywood after spending time working with New York's Group Theatre. Others, including Abraham Polonsky, were immigrants from Europe who came to the United States to escape fascism. This latter group brought European socialist ideologies with them to America. These men were sympathetic to the lower classes and held a deep hatred of fascism, an ideology inherently antagonistic to organized labour.⁴⁸ Many of those involved in film noir became victims of the Hollywood blacklist. David Wilt notes that there were at least thirty-nine blacklistedees with film noir credits to their name, including five members of the Hollywood Ten. He identifies forty-six, both blacklistedees and friendly witnesses, who were left-leaning, and notes that forty-two percent of films noir

accept controversy.” Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes*, pp. 147-148.

⁴⁵Broe, *Film Noir*, p. 44.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷Andersen, “Red Hollywood,” p. 260; Charles J. Maland, “Film Gris: Crime, Critique, and Cold War Culture in 1951,” *Film Criticism*, vol. 26, no. 3 (Spring, 2002), p. 19.

⁴⁸Broe, *Film Noir*, pp. xxvii-xxix.

were written by leftists.⁴⁹ Polonsky, John Garfield, and Robert Rossen, the writer, lead actor/co-producer, and director of *Body and Soul*, respectively, were all affected by the blacklist.

Despite their varied backgrounds, these filmmakers held one important commonality: they were affiliated in some way with the Popular Front.⁵⁰ Michael Denning describes the Popular Front as a movement which was “[b]orn out of the social upheavals of 1934 and coincid[ed] with the Communist Party's period of greatest influence in US society,” and which “became a radical historic bloc uniting industrial unionists, Communists, independent socialists, community activists, and émigré anti-fascists around labourist social democracy, anti-fascism, and anti-lynching.”⁵¹ Included in the ideology of the Popular Front was an opposition to racism and discrimination in general. The Popular Front's anti-fascist and anti-racist stance grew stronger after the alliance between communists and fascists in Europe was broken upon the Nazis invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. At that time, James M. Ford, a prominent African-American member of the CPUSA declared that “the struggle for the rights of the Negro people [is] an inseparable part of the struggle against fascism.”⁵² As we will see, this marriage of

⁴⁹David Wilt, “The Black Typewriter: Who Wrote Film Noir?,” in *A Companion to Film Noir*, ed. Andrew Spicer and Helen Hanson (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing, 2013), p.202-203. Wilt uses data from a yet unpublished book by a colleague of his.

⁵⁰Naremore, *More than Night*, p. 104; Hirsh, “*Film Gris*,” p. 89; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, pp. 4, 59-62.

⁵¹Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 4; James R. Barrett points out that there was also an international dimension to the formation of the Popular Front, noting that in 1935 the Comintern called for an alliance of communists with the more moderate leftist groups to stand in opposition to fascism. Barrett, “Rethinking the Popular Front,” *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 21, no. 4 (October, 2009): pp. 531-550.

⁵²Catherine Roth, “Fascism and its Ally, Racism: The Complexities of the Washington Commonwealth Federation's Stance on Civil Rights,” *Pacific Northwest Labor and Civil Rights Projects*, University of Washington, accessed September 9, 2013, available from

anti-discrimination and anti-capitalism in the minds of members of the Hollywood Popular Front led to the depiction of positive relations between the proletarian protagonists of film noir and their African-American counterparts, a dynamic especially evident in *Body and Soul*.

The Popular Front continued to have an impact on the American cultural industry in the postwar period. At that time, both filmmakers and members of the public, including writers from the communist newspaper *Daily Worker*, believed that films could be used to advance the social agenda of the left. Polonsky admits that there was “a generalized political awareness” among filmmakers of the left, who tried “to make films that reflected this awareness in one way or another.”⁵³ Realistic depictions of pressing social issues could be presented most effectively, many believed, in semi-documentary films, which came from the tradition of wartime documentaries, and, before that, from pre-war, socially conscious documentaries like *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936).⁵⁴ Many of these semi-documentary films fit our definition of film noir.⁵⁵ In this way, Popular Front creative artists working in Hollywood contributed to what Denning has called the “labouring of American culture” between 1934 and the onset of the Red Scare.⁵⁶

One notable individual responsible for the “labouring of American culture” was film producer Adrian Scott. When called to testify during the first Hollywood HUAC

http://depts.washington.edu/depress/washington_commonwealth_federation_civil_rights.shtml#_ednref16.

⁵³ Ceplair and Englund, *The Inquisition*, p. 323.

⁵⁴ Broe, *Film Noir*, p. 44; Will Straw, “Documentary Realism and the Postwar Left,” in *Un-American Hollywood*, eds. Frank Krutnik, Steve Neale, Brian Neve, and Peter Stanfield (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), p. 135.

⁵⁵ Brian McDonnell, “Film Noir and the City,” *Encyclopedia of Film Noir*, eds by Geoff Mayer and Brian McDonnell (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), p. 46.

⁵⁶ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, pp. xvi, xvii.

hearing in 1947, Scott accused the Republican Congress of racism in an effort to show that the "unfriendly witnesses" were actually more American than the bigoted Congressmen, as he considered racism to be inherently un-American. Scott stated that the whole hearing amounted to "a cold war waged by the Committee of Un-American Activities against minorities."⁵⁷ He also noted that although the Committee claimed to be anti-racist, "the anti-Negro Ku Klux Klan and all hate groups love and work for him," and that they have done nothing to remedy the "inhumane treatment of minorities."⁵⁸

This was not simple rhetoric on the part of Scott. Evidence shows that he did indeed intentionally put forth anti-racist messages in his films. In a letter to the heads of RKO, in which Scott tried to convince them to allow him to produce *Crossfire* (1947), Scott wrote that the film would serve as a statement on the evils of anti-Semitism and "anti-negroism" which were prevalent throughout the country, and which would "grow unless heroic measures [were] undertaken to stop them." *Crossfire*, Scott asserted, would serve as "one sure measure" toward achieving this goal.⁵⁹ However, that anti-racism would only be implied by the film's more explicit stance against anti-Semitism. But as Art Simon argues, for many members of the Popular Front, anti-Semitism and racism against African Americans were interconnected, as both were a part of the "unitary character of prejudice." As one important member of the CPUSA put it, "[t]he defeat of antisemitism required the unification of all the progressive forces among the Jewish people, and their

⁵⁷ Naremore, *More Than Night*, pp. 125, 126.

⁵⁸ Adrian Scott, "Statement to the House Un-American Activities Committee," November, 1947, accessed June 15, 2013, available from <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/langdon/pdfs/c9-7-as-huac-statement.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Adrian Scott, in a memo to studio heads William Dozier and Charles Kromer at RKO, cited in Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition*, p. 444.

alliance with all the forces within the camp of progress, particularly the Negro people."⁶⁰

In his statement to HUAC, Scott noted that all of the accused "detest any practise which degrades any minority or any religion or any people," and that those filmmakers had expressed anti-racism in their films, which "stood for issues which are beneficial to the great mass of American people." Their films, he asserts, have often "presented the Jew and the Negro (and other minorities as well) in unstereotyped terms. They have made it an uncompromising rule in motion pictures to treat all minorities with dignity." He then goes on to give a "partial motion picture record of [the accused] in behalf of minorities." In that record he mentioned the film noir boxing melodrama *Body and Soul*, which "treats Negro and Jew with dignity and justice as free men."⁶¹ Unlike *Crossfire*, this film contained interactions between its white male protagonist and African Americans.

The nature of the studio system prevented Scott and the other Popular Front members working on *Crossfire* from being too explicit in their social commentary. The objectives of studio executives and restrictions by the MPPDA caused *Crossfire*'s filmmakers to be cautious in their depictions of anti-fascism and anti-racism. To appease RKO executives Scott brought in a second, "non-political," screenwriter to tone down the political dialogue of the original screenplay.⁶² Those involved in the creation of *Body and*

⁶⁰ Art Simon, "The House I Live In: Albert Maltz and the Fight against Anti-Semitism, in *Un-American Hollywood*, eds. Neve, et al, p. 173.

⁶¹ Scott, "Statement."

⁶² For a full account of the production history of *Crossfire* and the changes which had to be made to the film in order to please executives and censors, see Jennifer Langdon-Teclaw, "Negotiating the Studio System: Adrian Scott and the Politics of Anti-Fascism in *Cornered*," *Film Studies*, no. 7 (Winter, 2005), pp. 16-31; For an excellent account of another film noir which had to tone down its leftist political message to appease the studio and censors see Sumiko Higashi, "American Origins of Film Noir: Realism in Urban Art and The Naked City," in *Looking Past the Screen: Case Studies in American Film History and Method*, eds. Jon Lewis and Eric Smoodin (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 353-380.

Soul, on the other hand, were not as restricted as Scott and his associates.

Many Hollywood stars at the end of the 1940s were forming production companies as a way of avoiding high taxes. Actors often found themselves in the highest tax bracket as salaried workers of the major studios. By working for their own companies, stars were able to pay themselves strategically to avoid the high tax burden.⁶³ This also gave them more freedom in choosing their projects and enabled them to operate with fewer restrictions, leading to a more personal cinema, something which would become even more common in the 1970s.⁶⁴ But in the 1940s and 1950s, even while working through their own studios, filmmakers were still restricted a great deal, as they needed to rely on the major studios for distribution and finance.⁶⁵ So, even if they had more freedom in the production process, it would be necessary to produce films that the studios wanted to distribute, which meant complying with the production code.

The filmmakers working on *Body and Soul* were also affected by such issues. For instance, the story as originally conceived was about real-life boxing champion Barney Ross, who was addicted to heroin. According to the film's editor, Robert Parish, when the film was still in early stages of development, Charlie Einfeld, one of the owners of Enterprise Studios, said that the film could not be made because "the code won't permit movies where drugs are even mentioned." This meant that even if they could finance the picture, it would not garner a seal of approval from the PCA, and the studios would not

⁶³ Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, p. 282; Eric Hoyt, "Hollywood and the Income Tax, 1929-1955," *Film History*, vol. 22.no. 1 (November, 2010), pp. 10-11.

⁶⁴ This is Aaron Michael Weiss's argument in "Collaborative Auteurism: An Unanticipated Consequence of the Postwar Income Tax" (Master's thesis, The Savannah College of Art and Design, 2012).

⁶⁵ AsuAksoy and Kevin Robins, "Hollywood for the 21st Century: Global Competition for Critical Mass in Image Markets," *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, no. 16 (1992), p. 6.

pick it up for distribution. Rossen and the producers instead decided to have Polonsky write a story, not about Ross, but about a fictionalized boxer “who came up the hard way,” omitting any reference to drug use.⁶⁶ The filmmakers were, however, less willing to omit, as PCA officials advised, elements of “social intermingling of white and colored people or of a boxing contest between two people of the opposite color.”⁶⁷

John Garfield, star and co-producer of *Body and Soul*, was an outspoken liberal who came to Hollywood and signed with Warner Brothers after working for the Group Theatre. Garfield left Warners in 1946 to form Enterprise Studios because he wanted more control over his career. “I don't want to be a movie actor only,” he admits, and “[t]his way I can go anywhere and do anything. I also have script and director approval on any outside picture I accept.”⁶⁸ While several influential artists had a hand in making *Body and Soul*, it was Garfield who was in greatest control of the production process. He claims that he “exercis[ed] a claim in selection of the story, roles and [had] a voice in all phases of production.”⁶⁹ For this reason, I will refer to his assessment of the film as the primary source of authorial intention, supported by statements by others involved in the filmmaking process, especially Polonsky.

The film fits our definition of a film noir. Firstly, it is a melodrama, as it involved crime, gangsters, bombs, beatings, double-crosses, murders and pugilism. In fact, those

⁶⁶Schultheiss, “Annotations to the Screenplay,” in Abraham Polonsky, *Body and Soul: The Critical Edition*, ed. John Schultheiss (Northridge: The Center for Telecommunication Studies, 2002), p. 184.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁶⁸Patrick McGrath, *John Garfield: The Illustrated Career in Films and on Stage* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 1993), p. 134.

⁶⁹John Garfield, “Our Part in *Body and Soul*: Fists, Brains and Breaks,” *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Winter, 1948): p. 20.

involved in making the film openly acknowledged that they had set out to make “a straight forward, gutsy melodrama, right off the streets.”⁷⁰ Unlike the boxing melodramas which came a decade before it, however, the film contained those elements of psychological conflict which Geoff Mayer spoke of. This is evident from the very first scene in the film, when Charlie wakes from a troubled sleep, shouting the name of his companion who had died the previous day. This scene is a flashforward, and the rest of the film tells the story of how the protagonist’s troubles came to be.

Body and Soul’s final scene, in which Charlie is forced to choose between throwing his last fight and keeping his dignity, is perhaps the most evident example of moral conflict faced by the protagonist. This scene was a reflection of the values held by the film’s screenwriter. According to a friend of Polonsky, “there was no more important quality to Polonsky than honour, or as he chose to root it in the individual—character.” This notion of character is the reason for Polonsky’s disdain for HUAC. He liked “people who spoke straightforwardly and could be taken at their word,” and he hated HUAC’s “distortion of motive and meaning. Polonsky believed that one should be able to speak one’s mind and live one’s private life, however these might be expressed, and that no individual should stand in the way of another’s enjoyment of such rights.”⁷¹ Charlie Davis’s predicament at the end of *Body and Soul* is similar to that of those called to testify before HUAC. Charlie was faced with a moral dilemma. He could choose to throw his

⁷⁰ Robert Parrish, film editor on *Body and Soul*, quoted in Leger Grindon, *Knockout: The Boxer and Boxing in American Cinema* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2011), p. 196.

⁷¹ Joseph Janeti, “That Affable Familiar Ghost... (a *Body and Soul* memoir),” in Abraham Polonsky, *Body and Soul: The Critical Edition*, pp. 393-395.

final fight, which would negatively affect many around him, including friends who had bet on him, but in so doing he would win enough money to live comfortably for the rest of his life, as he had placed a large bet on his opponent to win. If he refused to throw the fight he risked being killed by the gangsters who made the set-up. Charlie, imbued by his creator with that ever important virtue, "character," thus experiences a moral dilemma, and in the end chooses not to throw the fight.

Several aesthetic techniques are used to emphasize Charlie's inner turmoil and heighten the mood of despair. The film's first scene, for instance, when Charlie awakens screaming Ben's name, is shot with low-key lighting, conveying an unsettling mood from the start. In next scene the narrative flashes back to a simpler time in Charlie's life, when he had just won the amateur world title and met the woman he would later fall in love with. These scenes are shot in high-key lighting and are, as Place and Peterson would suggest, meant to convey normalcy and contrast to greatly with the scenes depicting Charlie's struggles. When troubling situations are being portrayed, especially when the morality of the character's actions is called into question, the common tropes of the film noir style are used to enhance the dismal mood. For instance, there is a scene in which the gangster-promoter visits Ben after his fight with Charlie. In this scene the audience learns that Ben was sick and that the fight was fixed. This scene is shot from a low-angle and is sparsely lit, giving it a somber tone, and the low camera angle makes the gangster appear more threatening as he looms over the defeated champion. All of these techniques help to heighten the mood and persuade the audience that capitalism and greed

cause corruption of character.⁷²

In addition to the implicit message about the evils of capitalism, the film also has an anti-racist message. This is most evident in the relationship between Charlie and Ben. While many noir protagonists are simply depicted as being comfortable in African-American milieus, or as being friendly with black acquaintances, Charlie actually develops a strong bond with the film's primary African-American character. In fact, Charlie's relationship with Ben is portrayed more intimately than that of Charlie and his mother or his wife. When Charlie learns that the fight between himself and Ben was set up, he feels bad for Ben and hires him as his trainer. The two characters remain good friends throughout the film. In fact, Charlie's relationship with Ben is central to the film's plot, and Charlie's psychological troubles largely stem from Ben's death. Throughout the film, Ben serves both as Charlie's friend and mentor, helping Charlie not only in the boxing ring but also in his personal life. For instance, Ben strives to protect Charlie from the corrupt gangsters by standing up to them when they try to have Charlie throw his final fight. This act of friendship led directly to Ben's death. According to Bob Herzberg, "Rossen and Garfield's message is plain as day: Racism is the natural outcome of capitalist exploitation."⁷³

Canada Lee's assessment of the film speaks to the intended anti-racist message put forth by the filmmakers. According to Lee,

In the film I'm cast as a fighter. A fighter who happens to be Negro. Not a

⁷²See footnote 3.

⁷³Bob Herzberg, *The Left Side of the Screen: Communist and Left Wing Ideology in Hollywood, 1929-2009* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011), p. 196.

'Negro fighter'. In fact, nowhere in the entire film is the word 'Negro' used. As a human being I liked that. Throughout the movie, John Garfield... calls me Ben and I, in turn, call him Charlie. There isn't a single "Yessuh, boss." That's the way Garfield, Bob Rossen, the director, and others making the picture wanted it. I like that as a human being.

He goes on to say that his role in the film is "a meaty one and a sympathetic one," as Ben is depicted as having "integrity, and pride, and intelligence." He also tells of one incident during the shooting of the film in which Garfield accidentally called Lee "boy" instead of Ben. According to Lee,

I hadn't even noticed it, because I knew Garfield didn't have a patronizing bone in his body. The director said 'Cut, print it'. But not Garfield. Though [Garfield] was a co-producer as well as star of the film, and reprinting meant added expenses, he said: 'No, we can't print it. I called Canada 'boy' instead of Ben'.

That incident, according to Lee, was "typical of the fine outlook of the people I worked with on this movie."⁷⁴

John Schultheiss has noted that because Polonsky was a member of the Communist Party and because a "major concern [of the Party] was the enfranchisement of the 'Negro' The creative team of *Body and Soul* consciously attempted to make a potent social statement" by hiring Canada Lee for the role of Ben. Schultheiss credits Polonsky as the primary driving force behind the message of racial tolerance in the film. "In giving Ben Chaplin a voice," Schultheiss writes, "Polonsky sought to violate the convention of the 1940s Hollywood cinema." "It is Polonsky's urgent Marxist message of

⁷⁴Canada Lee "Our Part in *Body and Soul*: *Body and Soul* Has Heart Too," *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Winter, 1948): p. 20.

ideological unity,” he continues, “based on the humanist principle of equality that transcends racial, ethnic, and class boundaries.”⁷⁵ Certainly, Polonsky was sympathetic to the working class and to minorities.⁷⁶ However, it was not Polonsky, but Garfield, who decided to hire Lee to play Ben, whose racial identity was not made explicit in the screenplay.⁷⁷

Garfield's own opinion of the film's message complements Lee's comments. In an article written for *Negro Digest*, Garfield claimed that he was only interested in making “truthful” films, which to him meant films without stereotyped characters. He goes on to discredit films which imply that the lives of African Americans are somehow separate from those of Caucasians, and he favoured having them interact more often on screen. He also calls for greater opportunities for African-American filmmakers and workers in Hollywood, as they were largely unrepresented in the industry. Garfield points out that in Hollywood productions, African Americans were often relegated to “special” roles which accentuated “the 'odd' aspects of the minority, rather than the everyday ones.” He believes that “better film treatment of minorities would result in their greater integration in the life of America.” Garfield says that he was proud to have worked on *Body and Soul* because

I was an actor in, and co-producer of a well-integrated, entertaining drama. It has a climax that should have a terrific impact. But more, all its characters are

⁷⁵Schultheiss, “Annotations to the Screenplay,” pp. 196-197.

⁷⁶In Polonsky's review of the 1947 film *The Best Years of Our Lives*, for instance, he expresses his regret that most Hollywood filmmakers are unable to give a sympathetic, realistic portrayal of working class lives, and that “people who work for their living in factories” are “left inarticulate by the artists.” He believes *The Best Years of Our Lives* could have attained “greatness” if not for that one flaw. Abraham Polonsky, “*The Best Years of Our Lives: A Review*,” *Hollywood Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 3 (April, 1947), p. 260.

⁷⁷Garfield fought hard to have Lee play the role of Ben and, according to Danny Glover, refused to make the film if Lee was not chosen for the part. *The John Garfield Story*, directed by David Heeley (Atlanta, GA: TCM, 2003).

people, whether they are Christian or Jewish, Caucasians or Negroes. In fact, to read the script alone, it would be hard to tell which role Canada Lee... would play. Actually, he's one of the prize fighters. But according to the screenplay, he's simply a figure illustrating the vicious and corrupt nature of some phases of boxing. The aim was to show a victim of other people's greed. It just happened that he was a Negro. It could as easily have been any other fighter. And there are other similar victims in the film that aren't Negroes.⁷⁸

So Herzberg was almost right. Capitalism was not necessarily the cause of racism, but all races were affected by it. To champion the idea that "all men are created equal," which Scott seemed to be alluding to in his testimony to HUAC, was the real aim of Garfield and the other filmmakers involved with *Body and Soul*. In this film, as well as in other classical films noir, the white working-class protagonist and his African-American colleagues were equally depicted as victims of American capitalism, and were often portrayed as allied together in their struggles.⁷⁹

Filmmakers with such intentions were not necessarily widespread in Hollywood at that time. Canada Lee claims that his experience making *Body and Soul* was much more pleasing than his experience working on *Lifeboat* (1944), directed by Alfred Hitchcock, which largely featured actors who were not members of the Popular Front. One of the actors in the film constantly referred to African Americans in derogatory terms, which offended Lee, though his non-confrontational nature stopped him from acting on his feelings.⁸⁰ This was not an isolated case, as racial antagonism, unlike in film noir, was quite common throughout America in the postwar period.

⁷⁸John Garfield, "How Hollywood Can Better Race Relations," *Negro Digest*, vol. 6 (Nov. 1947), pp. 4-8.

⁷⁹The film was recognized at the 1948 Unity Awards for "present[ing] its featured Negro player in a manner highly sympathetic and complimentary." Cited in Buhle, *A Very Dangerous Citizen*, p. 116.

⁸⁰Lee, "Our Part," p. 21.

After World War II, many white Americans still accepted segregation. Between 1950 and 1960, for instance, a majority of whites claimed that they would move out of their neighbourhoods if blacks were to move in in large numbers.⁸¹ At the end of the war many whites who had the resources to do so moved from the city to the suburbs. Manufacturers also relocated out of urban centers, leaving fewer jobs for workers in the city who could not afford to move. Those left behind had to contend with the changing racial makeup of their neighbourhood. As blacks continued to migrate North after the war, many urban whites began to panic at the prospect of increased competition for jobs. Moreover, many whites believed that if African Americans were to move into their neighbourhoods, the value of their properties would decrease, contributing to their preference for segregation. In the words of one Detroit housewife, "What about us, who cannot afford to move to a better location and are surrounded by coloured?... Most of us invested our life's savings in property and now we are in constant fear that the neighbour will sell its property to people of a different race." A 1951 study indicated that 68 percent of the urban white population in Detroit preferred segregation to integration. Among working-class whites a staggering 85 percent preferred segregation.⁸² Whites also worried that African Americans would cause more noise, riotous behaviour, and miscegenation. Some even believed in keeping black and white children separate, as interactions between them might someday lead to sexual relations. As one Detroit protester proclaimed: "I have

⁸¹Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, "Blacks, Loyalty, and Motion Picture Propaganda in WWII," *The Journal of American History*, vol. 73, no. 2 (September, 1986), p. 388; W.A.V. Clark, "Residential Preferences and Neighborhood Racial Segregation: A Test of the Schelling Segregation Model," *Demography*, vol. 28, no.1 (February, 1999), p. 2.

⁸²Thomas J. Sugrue, "Crabgrass-Roots Politics: Race, Rights, and Reaction Against Liberalism in the Urban North: 1940-1964," *The Journal of American History*, vol. 82, no. 2 (September, 1995), pp. 555-556.

nothing against the colored... [but] I wouldn't want them for a neighbour nor growing up with my children.”⁸³ As we will see in the final chapter, many middle-class whites were able to appear racially tolerant during the 1950s and beyond simply by paying lip-service to liberal notions of tolerance. Not until the 1970s would film noir portray negative relations between the white working class and African Americans.

Despite the real racial antagonism which existed across the country in the late 1940s, overt racism was rare in classical film noir. Noir filmmakers' stance on racism fused with their stance on capitalism, leading them to create proletariat heroes who were racially tolerant. Popular Front filmmakers like Garfield and Scott believed strongly in labour rights and in non-discrimination. These ideological leanings were largely responsible for the content of films noir and for the portrayal of the working class as sympathetic characters that interacted in a positive manner with African Americans. The political climate in Hollywood, too, led many of these same artists to feel a sort of cross-class alliance with the Hollywood proletariat. Specifically, the alliance between Hollywood labourers of the CSU and popular front filmmakers, notably from the SWG, encouraged those artists to depict the working class in a positive manner. This sympathetic working-class noir protagonist is exemplified by John Garfield's portrayal of Charlie Davis in *Body and Soul*.

⁸³Gary Gerstle, “Working-Class Racism: Broaden the Focus,” *International Labor and Working Class History*, no. 44 (Fall, 1993), pp. 36, 37.

Chapter 2: **Blaxploitation Noirs: *Superfly*(1972) and *The Mack*(1973)**

Shaft, from the 1972 crime film that bears his name, is an example of a new type of noir protagonist which emerged in the 1970s. Shaft had many of the characteristics of his classical predecessors: he was a troubled, working-class detective who eschewed domesticity and lived and worked in an urban setting. But Shaft was also different from the Mike Hammers and Phillip Marlowes of the 1940s and 1950s in two important ways. First, Shaft was African American, and second, he lived in a cinematic world teeming with racial antagonism.

The collapse of the studio system, declining theater audiences, and various other social and economic factors, brought about changes in the nature of the noir protagonist and the world in which he lived. In the late 1960s, in an effort to recover financially, studio bosses began to search for a formula that would draw filmgoers back to the theatres. One of the demographics targeted by the studios was the urban African-American youth, many of whom had adopted the ideologies of the emerging Black Power movement and who were starved for new images of black characters in film. The result was the blaxploitation cycle of the early 1970s, a cycle which often adopted narratives and aesthetic techniques of classical film noir but also contained racial antagonism which had not been present in those earlier melodramas.

Blaxploitation refers to a cycle of films produced in the early 1970s which were made on small budgets but promised good returns by exploiting the demand from the African-American community for films which featured characters and settings with which they could identify. These films were most often set in African-American urban

communities, such as Harlem, Oakland, or Watts, and provided cheap thrills, with excessive sex and violence. While blaxploitation films encompass several genres, including horror and martial-arts films, this chapter will focus particularly on what Mark Reid calls "black action films."¹ Special attention will be given to two films, *Superfly* and *The Mack*, both of which are black action blaxploitation films and which can be categorized as neo-noirs. These neo-noirs, unlike their classical predecessors, featured African-American protagonists and a significant amount of racial conflict between them and white working-class characters. Understanding why these black action blaxploitation films were made helps us understand why race relations in 1970s noirs were so different from those of the classical cycle.

After World War II, a number of circumstances caused a financial crisis within Hollywood which forced the studios to change the way they made movies. The greatest problem Hollywood faced in the postwar years was a steady decline in audience attendance. While 1946 had been the most successful year in Hollywood's history, thereafter theater attendance and profits began to decline significantly.² The primary reason for the decline in attendance was a changing American demographic. After returning home from the war, many white middle-class Americans chose to move out of the city away from the central hub of movie theatres, and into the suburbs where they settled to start families. Leisure activities were also changing to accommodate the

¹ See Mark Reid, "The Black Action Film: The End of the Patiently Enduring Black Hero," *Film History*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Winter, 1988), pp. 23-26.

² Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 330, 331; see also Michalis Kokonis, "Hollywood's Major Crisis and the American Film 'Renaissance'," pp. 172, 176, accessed May 3, 2013, available from <http://www.enl.auth.gr/gramma/gramma08/kokonis.pdf>.

demographic shift. Many suburban Americans in this period turned to such activities as golf, fishing and gardening, and stopped going to the movies regularly, partially because the theatres were located in urban centres. The increasing popularity of television also had a negative impact on Hollywood, as Americans could now be entertained from the comfort of their own homes.³

Movie audiences were also becoming more differentiated after the war. This was troubling for the studios, which had traditionally been focused on appealing to the widest array of people possible. Foreign films and underground art films, for instance, were becoming more popular in certain circles, especially among university students and more educated filmgoers. These films were often exhibited in small “art-house” theatres or on university campuses.⁴ Drive-ins, which screened mainly youth-oriented exploitation pictures, had also come into vogue.⁵ Indeed, by the early 1960s, the baby-boomer generation had reached the age where they could be targeted as consumers. Of course, they were not the only audience, but they were an increasingly significant one which the studios would fail to target effectively until the late 1960s.⁶

Another issue that proved devastating for the studios financially was the

³ John Sedgwick, “Product Differentiation at the Movies: Hollywood, 1946-1965,” *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. 62, no. 3 (September, 2002), p. 679.

⁴ Barbara Wilinsky notes that the audience for art films rose 132 percent between 1946 and 1956. See Wilinsky, “‘A Thinly Disguised Art Veneer Covering a Filthy Sex Picture’: Discourses on Art Houses in the 1950s,” *Film History*, vol. 8, no. 2 (June, 1996), p. 145.

⁵ Writing in 1951 for the *Hollywood Quarterly*, economist Rodney Luther called drive-ins “the most promising new development in the motion picture industry,” and noted the exponential growth in the number of theatres in the post-war period, from just 60 theatres in 1946, to 2000 by 1951. See Luther, “Drive-in Theatres: Rags to Riches in Five Years,” *Hollywood Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 4 (Summer, 1951), p. 401-402.

⁶ Sklar, *Movie Made America*, pp. 293, 294; Thomas Schatz, “The New Hollywood,” in *Film Theory Goes to The Movies: Cultural Analysis of Contemporary Film*, eds. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 14.

Paramount Divorcement Decree. The Supreme Court in 1947 declared that the business practices of the studios amounted to an illegal oligopoly. The studios were thereafter forced to split up the production, distribution, and exhibition arms of their companies into separate entities with different ownership, which caused them to enter “a period of high financial uncertainty and instability.”⁷ Furthermore, the practices of blind bidding and block booking were declared illegal, and the studios had to sell their theatres. This meant that they were no longer guaranteed a way to exhibit their films and that each film had to be sold on its own merits. Studios also fired workers they had under contract and leased their production facilities to independent producers. The entire system that had been set up during in the 1910s and 1920s would now need to be restructured.⁸

After the Paramount Decree each film was put together as a “packaged deal.” Since filmmakers and stars were no longer under contract to a studio, a team of now independent filmmakers and actors, as well as the rest of the crew, were put together for each film by a producer or by agencies who acted as “middle-men” between their clients and the studios.⁹ However, because studios were the primary source of financing for independents, and because they controlled film distribution, the major studios were able to maintain much of their influence in Hollywood. Indeed, even independent production companies had to heed the wishes of the studios if they wanted their films distributed and financed.

Studios did not always provide the financing for movies, however. Independent producers could chose to seek financing through banks or personal investors, but as

⁷Kokonis, “Hollywood’s Major Crisis,” p. 183.

⁸Schatz, “The New Hollywood,” pp. 8-9.

⁹*Ibid.*; Sklar, *Movie Made America*, p. 287.

Suzanne Donahue points out, “[i]f a filmmaker needs to raise money to finance a picture, distribution will often have to be secured prior to production.” This was not always the case, though, since “[t]he motion picture industry holds a lure for people who continue to want to be part of it, even if it means putting aside their rational business sense for a gamble on a dream.” Just the idea of taking part in a Hollywood project might entice an investor to put up funds. Having a distributor, however, provides more incentive for financiers to back a film.¹⁰ Because each film needed to be sold on its own merits to the theatres after blind bidding and block booking were deemed illegal, financiers were becoming more careful and selective over which films they chose to finance. This had the effect of restricting the content of Hollywood films to proven genres and formulas in the 1950s and 1960s.¹¹

To reiterate, the Paramount Decree, increasing suburbanization, the growing popularity of television, and changing audience tastes all acted together to push the studios to adopt new strategies. The studios focused on making fewer films into which they sank large amounts of money. Their strategy was to create lavish spectacles to draw in more customers per film. The idea was to offer people something that television could not provide and that meant differentiation from what could be viewed on the small screen.¹² This strategy was unsuccessful. For every hit, the studios made several flops, and money was lost. This was partially because the ageing studio bosses had lost touch with the new, younger audience, whose tastes in movies deviated from those of their parents.

¹⁰ Suzanne Mary Donahue, *American Film Distribution: The Changing Marketplace* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), pp. 50, 56.

¹¹ Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, p. 282, 287, 290.

¹² Martin, *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls*, pp. 16-18.

Many of the youth of the 1960s had become involved with some aspect of the counterculture. They were a politicized audience, with many taking part in one type of social movement or another. The civil rights movement, for instance, had attracted many young people, both black and white, and second wave feminism had been gaining influence. By the late 1960s the anti-war movement and Black Nationalism would grow in popularity as well.¹³ As director Sydney Pollock states, “with these revolutions that happened in the 60s, people wanted something that they recognized, that was a part of them. It wasn’t the distance from your life that was the appealing thing. In many ways, it was the recognition that [what was shown on screen] was a part of your life.”¹⁴ Many people were interested in seeing something on the screen that they were familiar with and could relate to; this would be the reason for the popularity of blaxploitation films among young African Americans. The studio bosses, however, took a while to catch on.¹⁵

It was not only the ageing studio heads who were out of touch with audience demands. By the 1960s, in fact, many of those studio executives were being replaced by younger men put in place by the new bosses of Hollywood, the heads of multi-national conglomerates that were absorbing the major studios. The conglomerate heads, men without prior experience in the film business, were positioned at the top of the Hollywood decision-making hierarchy and had the last word on which films would be produced. “The conglomerate heads may be business geniuses,” notes Pauline Kael, “but as far as movies are concerned they have virgin instincts; ideas that are new to them and take them

¹³ Doug Rossinow, “The New Left in the Counterculture: Hypotheses and Evidence,” *Radical History Review*, vol. 76 (Winter, 1997): pp. 79, 90.

¹⁴ *A Decade under the Influence*, directed by Ted Demme and Richard LaGravenese (New York: Independent Film Channel, 2003).

¹⁵ Biskind, *Easy Riders*, p. 14.

by storm may have failed grotesquely dozens of times.” Those working for the studio were often reluctant to disagree with their bosses; if they did, the bosses could, and often did, replace them with yes-men, and “[w]ithin a very short time, [the conglomerate heads] are in fact, though not in title, running the studio.”¹⁶

With all of the financial turmoil, by the late 1960s the studios had become desperate. They finally seemed to acknowledge that the strategy of trying to appeal to everyone with lavish blockbusters was failing. Indeed, in 1969, the chairman of American International Pictures wrote in the *Journal of the Producers Guild of America* that “[t]oday the audience is fragmented; and with the exception of the big and successful picture that may by its special elements appeal to many different groups, one must take aim at a special group in order to be successful.”¹⁷ Some traditional Hollywood blockbusters were certainly successful, as were some other traditional genre type films such as *Love Story*(1970) and *True Grit*(1969). But it was becoming increasingly difficult to determine which films would be hits and which would be flops. Therefore, when studio bosses finally realized the potential of cheaply made blaxploitation films, they took every advantage of it.

Before Hollywood had fully transitioned into its blockbuster phase, the social-problem cycle had already run its course. In the 1950s and into the 1960s, African-American characters in Hollywood films were often uncontroversial, polite, middle-class, asexual characters. While these films were certainly a step forward towards a more

¹⁶ Pauline Kael, “Why Are Movies So Bad? Or, the Numbers,” *The New Yorker* (June 23, 1980), n.p. accessed August 10, 2013, available from <http://www.paulrossen.com/paulinekael/whymoviesbad.html>; see also Peter Bart, *Infamous Players: A Tale of Movies, the Mob (And Sex)* (New York: Weinstein Books, 2011), p. 48.

¹⁷ Quoted in Cook, *Lost Illusions*, p. 284

positive portrayal of African Americans on screen, they tended to depict situations unfamiliar or unappealing to the majority of African Americans. This depiction would change by the 1970s with the emergence of strong, outspoken, sexual, African-American super-heroes, as portrayed first by Jim Brown, and later by the likes of Richard Roundtree and Fred Williamson.¹⁸ In the fifties and early sixties, however, it was Sidney Poitier's star which shone brightest.

Poitier generally played well-spoken, respectable middle-class black characters which, according to film critic Clifford Mason, "all white Americans loved."¹⁹ Mason claimed that Poitier's characters were "merely contrivances, completely lacking in any artistic merit. In all of these films he has been a showcase nigger, who is given a clean suit and a complete purity of motivation so that like a mistreated puppy, he has all the sympathy on his side and all these mean whites are just so many Simon Legrees."²⁰ The purpose of Poitier's characters, he went to say, is to "reassure white people of their innocence and superiority." Another critic described Poitier as "a million dollar shoe shine boy." So, despite the continued financial success of his films, Poitier's on-screen persona by the end of the 1960s was "laughably out of touch with the rising demand for assertive, realistic black images on the screen."²¹

It is not surprising that Poitier's "nice" and "respectable" middle-class characters were becoming old hat given the rising militancy and mounting racial tension throughout the country. While the early civil rights movement was characterized by peaceful

¹⁸ Massood, *Black City Cinema*, p. 81.

¹⁹ Clifford Mason, "Why Does White America Love Sidney Poitier So?" *New York Times*, September 10, 1957.

²⁰ *Ibid*; This particular quote is also cited in Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 72.

²¹ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, pp. 72, 74, 76.

demonstrations, or “passive resistance” as embodied by Martin Luther King, Jr. and his followers, it eventually became evident to many that if real improvements were to be achieved, non-violent resistance would not be the way to do it. Civil rights activist Ella Baker described the situation as she saw it:

I started off on the concept that you attempt to do it the respectable way. Then, you move up to another level or less, maybe, accepted way, which was a sit-in. Then you find that that doesn't work but so much, so you move up to something else, which may be a civil disobedience-type action. Then you find that doesn't work and then what do you do? You may have to come to that last resort, which is the revolutionary thrust.²²

Some embraced the strategies associated first with Malcolm X and later with Stokely Carmichael, who advocated “a rejection of the white view of the Negro as inferior, a positive affirmation of the Negro’s history and his future, and a turning inward of the Negro group, accompanied by some repudiation of the white world.”²³ In 1966, Carmichael became chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee(SNCC), endorsed “Black Power,” and rejected the strategy of non-violence. It was also in that year that the Black Panther Party was founded. A wave of race riots added fuel to the fire, notably the Los Angeles Watts Riot of 1965.²⁴ On July 9, 1966, the *Chicago Defender* ran an article on the “New Leadership” of the civil rights movement in which it declared: “this is a new day... the doctrine of passive resistance as preached by Dr. King is ebbing,

²²Quoted in Stephen Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be: The Black Freedom Struggle from Emancipation to Obama* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 326.

²³ David R. Colburn and George E. Pozzetta, “Race, Ethnicity and Political Legitimacy,” in *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 122, 124.

²⁴Reid, “The Black Action Film,” p. 23; Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, pp. 71, 76.

[it is being replaced by a] determination to meet fire with fire."²⁵

Given the militant climate of the moment, it is not surprising that the first major Hollywood production to deal with African-American militancy was released in 1967. That film was Otto Preminger's *Hurry Sundown*, which was the first in Hollywood to seriously address militant civil rights activism. However, it was riddled with Hollywood stereotypes of the Old South, like the Mammy, the "New Good Sensitive Negro," as well as "the Corrupt Old White Bigot." According to Bogle, the filmmakers' attempt to tackle racial issue amounted to "inadvertent satire and parody." While this movie is full of laughable "clichés and misrepresentations," it opened the door for the "pure satire and the intentional use of stereotypes and clichés" of films to come later, notably those of the blaxploitation cycle of the early 1970s.²⁶ Before this cycle was initiated, however, one studio in particular took a significant step forward by assigning the first African American to direct a feature film.

While there had been a vibrant independent black film industry before the Second World War, until 1968 no major Hollywood studio had ever hired an African-American film director. Starting in the 1960s, there was significant pressure placed on the studios by outside organizations such as the NAACP who threatened to boycott the industry unless more blacks were hired. When the Federal Fair Employment Act was passed in 1965, Hollywood came under even more pressure to hire black filmmakers, and the NAACP had a new tool to use in their campaign to have more African Americans working in the

²⁵Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought to Be*, p. 329.

²⁶Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes*, pp. 211-213.

industry.²⁷

In Hollywood it was “who you know, rather than what you know” that led to important appointments.²⁸ It was certainly who Gordon Parks knew that landed him the job as the first black Hollywood studio director. In 1964, before getting his first directorial gig, Parks published a novel titled *The Learning Tree*, based on his own life experiences. Actor-Director John Cassavetes, a friend who met Parks while they worked for *Life* magazine, read Parks's book and liked it. He encouraged Kenneth Hyman, head of Warner Brothers' Seven Arts Studio, to meet with Parks and to hire him to film his own novel. Hyman asked Parks if he would like the opportunity to write the screenplay, as well as produce and compose music for the picture. This came as such a shock to Parks that he simply said “Why not?” as he “thought the guy was lying.”²⁹ But Hyman was as good as his word. Parks later admitted that Hyman “broke down all the barriers that had existed [in Hollywood] forever.”³⁰ The film was released in 1969 under the same title as the novel and was generally well received. *Variety* called the film “sentimental, sometimes awkward, but ultimately moving.”³¹ Paul Schrader gave the film a lukewarm review, crediting Parks for making a film which “pioneers in subjects matter” and could

²⁷ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, pp. 83-84; Eithne Quinn suggests that African Americans had been so underrepresented in Hollywood in the postwar period because many white authorities in Hollywood were convinced that African Americans either did not want to work in Hollywood or were unqualified. This, Quinn suggests, amounted to a “sincere fiction;” while the executives who held these beliefs truly believed them, they were simply not true. See Eithne Quinn, “Sincere Fictions: The Production Cultures of Whiteness in Late 1960s Hollywood,” *The Velvet Light Trap*, vol. 67 (Spring, 2011), p. 5

²⁸ Quinn, “Sincere Fictions,” p. 5.

²⁹ *Unstoppable: A Conversation with Melvin Van Peebles, Gordon Parks, and Ossie Davis*, directed by J. Gregory Lewis (Meridian, Co.: Black Starz!, 2005).

³⁰ Parks, quoted in Elizabeth Mehren, “A ‘Black Director’ or Simply an Artist?: Gordon Parks Fueled the Dreams of Young Black Filmmakers With ‘The Learning Tree’ in 1969; He’s Not Sure Those Dreams Have Come True,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 26, 1990.

³¹ “Review: The Learning Tree,” *Variety*, December 31, 1968, accessed June 21, 2013, available from <http://variety.com/1968/film/reviews/the-learning-tree-1200421803/>.

be enjoyed by both black and white audiences.³² African-American filmmaker Julie Dash was touched by the film. She admits that viewing the film marked “the first time that I experienced a dramatic narrative with multi-dimensional African-American characters portrayed in it.” The movie, according to Dash, “was very moving and loving and kind and gentle, and this was something that was totally alien to us at the time.”³³

Parks has suggested that if it was not for Hyman’s willingness to take a chance on an African-American director, “there probably would be no black director [in Hollywood] today.” Jesse Rhines, however, believes that Parks gives too much credit to Hyman. He believes that it was the desperation of the studios, brought on by “structural changes” in the industry and their search for a new audience, that encouraged Hyman to take a chance on an African-American director.³⁴ Indeed, Parks seemed like the ideal candidate to test the waters. One African-American “industry worker” explains that Parks was appealing to Warner Brothers because he “comes in with a package, a best-selling book, a score and lots of publicity behind him as a *Life* photographer. They couldn't turn that down if it was handed to them by a two-headed, one-legged Martin.”³⁵ Interestingly, this type of “pre-sold” material would become an essential feature of the blockbuster era in the late 1970s and beyond.

The actions of an important pressure group, the Black Anti-Defamation Association(BADA), caused one studio to lose so much money that it affected the way Hollywood studios made movies about African Americans. BADA was responsible for

³² Paul Schrader, "The Learning Tree," *Los Angeles Free Press*, August 22-29, 1969.

³³ *Unstoppable: A Conversation*.

³⁴ Jesse Rhines, *Black Films/White Money* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), pp. 41-42.

³⁵ Quinn, “Sincere Fictions,” p. 7.

bringing an end to the production of the feature *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which Twentieth Century-Fox planned to make in 1968. BADA protested the film due to the controversial nature of its source material, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of the same name by white author William Styron. In the novel, Nat Turner was portrayed as a sexually aggressive character lusting after white women. In reality, Turner had a wife, and there is no evidence of his desire for whites. According to Eithne Quinn, “the BADA campaign generated bad publicity, increased preproduction costs, and brought about the enforced distancing of film from book that so damaged the project’s established selling feature for white audiences.” The studio, in the end, lost a significant amount of money by canceling the production, which led them to abandon further efforts to produce A-level movies aimed at African-American audiences, contributing to the rise of the low-budget blaxploitation features.³⁶

Because the studio bosses, due to their financial situation, still wanted to exploit African-American audiences, they changed their strategy. They began to finance low-to mid-budget films and to hire African-American filmmakers to work on them. They would then sell those films as black productions made for black audiences.³⁷ For that reason, studio executives not only hired black filmmakers more frequently but also went to great lengths to be sure that the target audience was aware that they had done so. In so doing, the studios could also avert further complaints from civil rights groups and draw interest for these films by making them appear to be “black production[s],” giving the impression

³⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 9-11.

³⁷*Ibid.*

that “blacks had somehow beat the Hollywood system and taken over [the studios].”³⁸

It was not Parks, but director Melvin Van Peebles who would put the militancy of African-American youth on film. Van Peebles unintentionally initiated the blaxploitation cycle to which Parks would later make a contribution.³⁹ Ossie Davis, another black filmmaker, also helped to pave the way for blaxploitation with his comedy/crime film, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970), which foreshadowed the future development of blaxploitation. What these three directors did, according to Melvin Van Peebles's son Mario, “was put on the silver screen the black power movement.”⁴⁰ While these films were not exclusively noir melodramas, or “black action films,” many were, including the ones examined in this chapter.

Sweetback and his blaxploitation successors were portrayed as strong, outspoken, and sexually desirable to both black and white women. This new black hero was one that many African-American youth found intriguing. African-American entrepreneur Russell Simmons's commentary about *Shaft* is a testament to the positive response of the black male community to the new superhero: “I loved [*Shaft*]. I saw the movie three times. I was inspired by him. [It made me] feel like a young black superhero and all that. I came out of the theatre [thinking] 'I want that coat. I want to be like Shaft'.”⁴¹

All of these black action blaxploitation films feature white, working-class, male characters that are at odds with the African-American protagonist. Sometimes those white men played the antagonist, and sometimes they were colleagues of the hero. Racial slurs

³⁸ Reid, “The Black Action Film,” p. 28.

³⁹ Rhines, *Black Film/White Money*, pp. 41-43.

⁴⁰ *Unstoppable: A Conversation*.

⁴¹ Russell Simmons in *Half Past Autumn: the Life and Works of Gordon Parks*, directed by Craig Laurence Rice (New York: HBO, 2000).

are often exchanged, and the white man is, without fail, depicted as the bigot, as the viewer is encouraged to identify with the sympathetic African-American protagonist. Those white villains, according to Novotny Lawrence, “represent the oppressive establishment. Hence, their defeat at the hands of the African-American protagonists is symbolic of blacks overcoming the racism perpetuated by the machine.”⁴²

Cotton Comes to Harlem is an important film to consider when examining the origins of the blaxploitation cycle. *Cotton* was based on a book by African-American author Chester Himes, directed by an African American, Ossie Davis, and starred a primarily black cast. It was financed and distributed by a major Hollywood studio, United Artists, and produced by Samuel Goldwyn, Jr., who asked Davis to direct after hiring him to re-write the screenplay, which he believed lacked “authentic representation of black life.”⁴³ Davis credits the success of Parks’s *The Learning Tree* and that film’s popularity among the African-American community for allowing him the opportunity to direct this film.⁴⁴ Indeed, Parks had proven that a black director could make a successful Hollywood film primarily about African Americans.

However, while United Artists approved of Davis as director, it limited his creative powers. In 1970, the industry may have been increasingly aware of the financial potential of targeting the urban African-American community, but it was not ready to take big risks. United Artists approved a budget of just over a million dollars for *Cotton*, which was about half of the average budget for a film financed by a major studio at the time.

⁴² Novotny Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s: Blackness and Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 19.

⁴³ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes*, p. 233; Lawrence, *Blaxploitation*, p. 28.

⁴⁴ *Unstoppable: A Conversation*.

Additionally, Goldwyn wanted to make sure that the film appealed to both a black and a white audience, and convinced Davis to tone down the film's emphasis on "the black experience" to minimize the risk of driving away business from white filmgoers.⁴⁵ So Hollywood, in dire financial straits, was taking risks in its search for a winning formula, but it was doing so cautiously.

Cotton's plot centres on a large sum of money which was stolen from a "back-to-Africa" group and the two African-American detectives assigned to recover it. The film "played up to black fantasies... but also to white fantasies of a black world full of harmless stereotypes." This was the kind of satire and intentional use of stereotypes which Bogle was referring to, which stemmed from the unintentional "clichés and misrepresentations" of films like *Hurry Sundown*. Unlike that film, however, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* was primarily a product of African-American filmmakers who, as Bogle suggests, were telling its audiences that it was now acceptable to laugh at the ridiculousness of these old stereotypes.⁴⁶

The film alludes to the African-American social movements prevalent at the time of its release, foreshadowing the more militant films that came later. The "back-to-Africa" movement, for instance, was adopted by the militant activist group, the Nation of Islam. Black Nationalism is also alluded to in the film with the inclusion of men dressed in Black Nationalist attire. While they played little part in the development of the plot, the placement of these elements in the film reveals the influence of Black Nationalism throughout American society and demonstrates that Hollywood was finally ready to deal

⁴⁵ Lawrence, *Blaxploitation*, p. 39.

⁴⁶ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes*, p. 234.

openly, if comically, with controversial issues.⁴⁷ Allusions to Black Nationalism were also featured in perhaps the most influential film of the cycle, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*.

While *Cotton Comes to Harlem* was an important film, Mario Van Peebles's *Sweetback*, which was released almost a full year later, was even more influential, as Van Peebles truly discovered the formula which would define the blaxploitation cycle. This was the first film that fully realized the strong black super-hero who would become a staple of the blaxploitation cycle. *Sweetback*, similar to *Cotton Come to Harlem*, was primarily the product of African-American filmmakers, notably its writer-director Melvin Van Peebles, who sought to fulfill the desires of the “black popular audience” who “were starving for heroes that were not made for white audiences,” and to make a profit while doing so.⁴⁸

The film is about an African-American adult performer named Sweetback who works in a Los Angeles brothel. The movie chronicles Sweetback's journey after a violent encounter with white police officers, his escape, and his journey to the US-Mexico border and freedom from his white oppressors. While panned by many critics, the film garnered a large following. Young African Americans appreciated the new image of the “black man [who] met violence with violence and triumphed over the corrupt white establishment.”⁴⁹ The film finally provided an urban African-American character whose militant attitude many young blacks could identify with.⁵⁰ Part of the film's popularity stemmed from the

⁴⁷ Massood, *Black City Cinema*, pp. 86, 89.

⁴⁸ Reid, “The Black Action Movie,” p. 26.

⁴⁹ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes*, p. 235.

⁵⁰ Reid, “The Black Action Movie,” p. 28.

violent nature of its protagonist and the way he stood up to the white antagonists.⁵¹ Indeed, even Huey P. Newton of the Black Panthers encouraged his followers to go see this film, which was, in his opinion, a “revolution” in film-making.⁵²

Mario Van Peebles claims that because of the changing attitudes among many African Americans in their move from passive resistance to militancy, especially after the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and the Kennedys, blacks wanted to see something other than what he calls the “Motisa Tribe” depicted in films.⁵³ By that he means those passive, polite African-American characters that cater to whites (“the cat that says ‘Mo’ tea, sir?”).⁵⁴ What Melvin Van Peebles did, according to his son, was make “the first... Black Power, peace-and-freedom party flick, in-your-face, crazy sexy movie, that more reflected [*sic*] what was happening in the streets and they loved it.”⁵⁵ It was, in fact, Melvin Van Peebles’s intention to attract an audience through the portrayal of Black Nationalism. His number one reason for making the film was to “take another step in getting the Man’s foot out of my ass.”⁵⁶ These films and their imitators were among the first to offer black urban audiences films set in areas with which they were familiar. Instead of being set in middle-class milieus like the films of Poitier, these movies took

⁵¹ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes*, p. 235.

⁵² Wendy Sung, “Mainstream African American Cinema: The Struggle for Black Images in Hollywood,” in *African Americans in Popular Culture*, ed. Todd Boyd (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2008), p. 252.

⁵³ Mario Van Peebles, in an interview with Peter Thompson, quoted in “Film Reviews: BAADASSSSS,” *NineMsn News*, March 13, 2005, accessed August 9, 2013, available from http://sgp1.paddington.ninemsn.com.au/sunday/film_reviews/article_1735.asp?s=1.

⁵⁴ *Unstoppable: A Conversation*.

⁵⁵ Van Peebles, “Film Reviews: BAADASSSSS.”

⁵⁶ Van Peebles, *The Making of Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (New York: Lancer Books, 1971), p. 12

place in urban ghettos and were often shot on location.⁵⁷ This is the reason for *Sweetback's* popularity and is something the Hollywood studios would come to adopt in films like *Superfly* and *The Mack*.

Whereas *Sweetback* was an independently produced film released through a minor distributor, *Shaft*, like *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, was financed and distributed by a major Hollywood studio, MGM. Also like *Cotton*, this film was targeted at both a black and white audience. Reid claims that the film was marketed to a “black popular, or unpoliticized, audience,” a strategy employed by MGM to avoid alienating any potential paying customers at a time before it realized the potential of a film like *Sweetback*. To assure that the film would be successful among African Americans, MGM hired an advertising agency to exploit the fact that the film was helmed by a black director, and that other African Americans played significant roles in its production.⁵⁸

Shaft tells the story of a New York City detective who is recruited by Bumpy Jones, the leader of an African-American criminal organization in Harlem, to retrieve his kidnapped daughter from the Italian mafia. There is evidence of racial tension throughout the film, as Shaft on more than one occasion exchanges racial slurs with Lt. Androzzi, his Italian-American co-worker. Another indicator of racial tension comes when Androzzi tells Shaft that he is worried that if the story of gang warfare goes public, people will perceive it as a war of “black against white,” which might incite a race riot. He warns Shaft that “[w]e could have tanks and troops on Broadway if this thing breaks open,” insinuating that if New Yorkers found out that the black and white mafias were at war,

⁵⁷Massood, *Black City Cinema*, p. 85.

⁵⁸Reid, *Redefining*, pp. 84-85.

existing racial tensions would explode into violence throughout the city.

Each of these three films was a financial success.⁵⁹ Significantly, *Sweetback* was the one film out of the three which was made independently and not distributed by a major studio. It was also made on less than half of the budget of the other two films. *Sweetback*, in fact, was the highest grossing independent film made up to that time.⁶⁰ While *Cotton* may have been “the first all-black film to become a crossover box-office hit,” and “confirmed the existence of a significant multiracial audience for black films,” Van Peeble’s low budget sleeper proved that films which targeted a young, urban, African-American audience and dealt with social issues within that community could be produced for little money and return high profits. In addition to this, the studios learned from *Variety* magazine that 80 percent of *Shaft*’s audience was black and, therefore, that there was great potential in targeting that audience specifically.⁶¹

Van Peebles claims that *Shaft* was a direct result of the success of *Sweetback*. He contends that *Shaft* was originally written as a white character.⁶² The big players in the industry were certainly becoming increasingly aware of the potential of the African-American film audience when *Shaft* was being picked up by MGM. However, at the time it went into production the studio could not yet have known the full potential of films which, like *Sweetback*, were aimed directly at a young African-American audience and which contained militant racial elements. In fact, *Shaft* was based on a novel published in 1970, and in the novel *Shaft* is not white but African American. Indeed, Ernest Tidyman,

⁵⁹ Lawrence, *Blaxploitation*, pp. 40, 44; Reid, *Redefining*, p. 86.

⁶⁰ Lawrence, *Blaxploitation*, p. 44

⁶¹ Cook, *Lost Illusions*, p. 260.

⁶² Jason Solomons, “Badasssss is Back,” *The Guardian*, June, 2005, accessed December 19, 2014, available from <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2005/jun/05/features.review>.

the author of the novel, said that “[t]he idea came out of my awareness of both social and literary situations in a changing city.” He goes on to say that “[t]here are winners, survivors and losers in the New York scheme of things. It was time for a black winner, whether he was a private detective or an obstetrician.”⁶³

Cotton and *Shaft* may have alluded to black militants and contained some racial antagonism, but compared to *Sweetback* their racial antagonism was tame.⁶⁴ It was Van Peebles who would reveal just how receptive African-American youths were to films about militant black characters who would really “stick it to the man.” When he did so, Hollywood studios quickly changed their previously cautious stance. They began to target that audience specifically and were no longer worried about alienating whites. Cook even points out that *Sweetback* was “[m]anifestly threatening to whites,” citing a reactionary critique of the film by Vincent Canby. The blaxploitation films released thereafter, in Guerrero’s words, depicted whites as “the very inscription of evil.”⁶⁵

After the success of these three films, Hollywood executives finally realized that due to white flight from urban centres, African Americans now made up a significant portion of the audience for urban first-run theatres, a fact that *Variety* had actually noted

⁶³ J. Kingston Pierce, “The Rap Sheet: Man of Muscle, Ice, and Anger-Shaft!” *Kirkus*, March 29, 2011, accessed June 17, 2013, available from <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/features/rap-sheet-man-muscle-ice-and-anger-shaft/>.

⁶⁴ Mark Reid points out how *Shaft* is distant from the Harlem community, as his only friends are middle-class blacks and his white police co-workers, and, unlike *Sweetback*, he only combats whites who are outside the law. Furthermore, while he “may defy his Italian-American police-detective friend verbally... he never allows such defiance to take physical form” (See Reid, *Redefining*, pp. 85). So although *Shaft* fits our definition of noir very well, and it does contain racial antagonism, it is not used here as a case study because it was made just before Hollywood realized the full potential of movies containing excessive racial antagonism and black heroes who triumphed over white authority. This chapter focuses instead on true blaxploitation films, which were made after *Shaft*, and which were less restrictive in their portrayals of black/white antagonism.

⁶⁵ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 94.

several years earlier.⁶⁶ By 1972, Hollywood studios began to produce blaxploitation films in large numbers.⁶⁷ All of these films, including ones that can be categorized as film noir, featured a significant amount of racial antagonism.

The influence of classical film noir is evident in *Shaft*. In fact, *Shaft* was even marketed as "the black Sam Spade,"⁶⁸ and like films noir of the 1940s and 1950s, *Shaft* is a crime drama featuring a troubled working-class, or marginally middle-class, detective as the protagonist. *Superfly* and *The Mack* feature similar characteristics. However, unlike *Shaft*, their protagonists are not cops but criminals, albeit sympathetic ones like the protagonists in such classical films noir as *The Asphalt Jungle* and *Detour* (1945). As we will see, both *Superfly* and *The Mack* feature psychologically troubled protagonists and many of the aesthetic techniques familiar to classical noir. They can, therefore, be classified as neo-noirs.

Although they were released shortly afterwards, the racial antagonism in *Superfly* and *The Mack* is much more prevalent than in either *Cotton* or *Shaft*. Both of these films are about African-American criminals living in urban areas populated primarily by blacks. *Superfly* tells the story of a drug dealer named Youngblood Priest who wants to get out of the business after making one last deal. A corrupt white narcotics officer finds out about the deal and confronts Priest and his partners in crime. The cop allows Priest to continue his operation in exchange for a payment of \$10,000 every month. The policeman eventually kills one of Priest's partners. In the end, Priest confronts the policeman in a showdown. After the cop pulls a gun on him, Priest tells the officers that he has made a

⁶⁶ Cook, *Lost Illusions*, p. 261.

⁶⁷ Lawrence, *Blaxploitation*, p. 44.

⁶⁸ Pierce, "The Rap Sheet."

deal with the mafia to kill anyone who harms him. Now that he has fulfilled the promise of the film's tagline by “sticking it to the man,” Priest drives away safely and the credits begin to roll. In the words of University of Southern California Professor Todd Boyd, Priest “basically tells the white man to kiss his ass and walks off and jumps into his tricked-out hog.” That scene, according to Boyd, “was like John Wayne riding off into the sunset for black people.”⁶⁹ This comment demonstrates just how receptive many African Americans were to films about blacks overcoming the racism inherent in American society.

The Mack is similar to *Superfly* in that it is about a sympathetic, urban, African-American criminal who must contend with racist white police officers. The film begins with its protagonist, Goldie, involved in a shootout with the police after a drug deal gone wrong. He is arrested and must serve several years in prison. Upon his release he decides to make a name for himself as a pimp. Throughout the film he is harassed by the two white cops who arrested him initially. They continually threaten Goldie, telling him that sooner or later they will find an excuse to arrest him again. Eventually the two white police officers murder a black officer and try to frame Goldie for the murder. Meanwhile, Goldie becomes the most successful pimp in Oakland, winning the “Pimp of the Year” award at the Player’s Ball. Goldie soon finds out that his mother was severely beaten and visits her in the hospital where she dies. Goldie then learns that it was the white cops who killed his mother, and he murders them in retribution.

Superfly was written, directed, and financed by African Americans. The film was written by Phillip Fenty, who spent time in Harlem with people involved in dealing drugs

⁶⁹ *One Last Deal: A Retrospective*, *Superfly* DVD (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers, 2004).

and realized that most of them did not want to live that life and wanted to find a way out. The film was infused with social realism, as it was based on real people and situations and dealt with real issues facing African Americans in Harlem, albeit in a sensationalized way. The film was essentially a completely independent production. According to film producer Warrington Hudlin, “the people behind the camera... and, of course, the incredible cast, they all brought this kind of authentic expression. When you don’t have the studio influence, then the expression can be more authentic, and I think that’s why the movie had this kind of resonance then, and still now.”⁷⁰

The Mack’s filmmakers were also interested in depicting the lives of urban African Americans in a realistic way. The film started out as a treatment written by an African-American convict named Bobby Pool who wrote it on toilet paper while in prison. The director and producer of the film, who were intrigued by Poole’s story and the whole notion of pimps, travelled to Oakland and met with Frank Ward, a famous pimp who, according to the film’s producer, “ran Oakland.” Ward helped the filmmakers make the movie as real as they could and introduced them to Oakland’s underworld of prostitution and drug trafficking in exchange for giving him a role in the film.⁷¹

The psychological conflict of the protagonists stems largely from their environment. Priest and Goldie live in poor urban centres. Like the real life people those characters are based on, these blaxploitation protagonists were forced to adopt a life of crime in order to escape poverty. The director of *The Mack* called the film “a character study, ... not only of the man but of a very violent and turbulent world.” The film, he says,

⁷⁰ *One Last Deal*.

⁷¹ *Makin’ Aint Easy*, directed by Laura Nix (Los Angeles, CA: Automat Pictures, 2002).

“really is a reflection of all the things that were happening in Oakland at the time, [such as] 50 percent unemployment for black people. This was a terrible time. It was a time of desperation and fear and unemployment, and despair.” The criminal life which some chose to live was “[i]n their minds... the only way out.”⁷²

The black characters in both films claim that their unfortunate circumstances are a result of mistreatment by white society. As Priest’s friend Eddie says in one emotional scene in *Superfly*, “I know it’s a rotten game, but it’s the only one the man left us to play. That’s the stone cold truth.” Similarly, after Goldie is released from prison, his mother asks him what he is going to do. He responds by saying “I gotta go out there and fight the man the only way I know how.” These characters are forced into a life of crime by the white man, and it’s the white man, represented by white police officers, who try to punish the protagonists for their criminal activity. Racism and psychological despair are, in this way, interconnected in these films.

These circumstances cause a moral dilemma for the protagonists. Priest, for instance, desperately wants to quit being a drug pusher. He says he wants to get out “[b]efore I have to kill somebody. Before somebody ices me.” However, both his best friend and the corrupt cops try to convince him that he should continue his life of crime and that a normal life for him is impossible. Goldie, on the other hand, quit being a drug dealer and took up pimping, a life which he initially enjoys, but which causes friction between him, his religious mother who wants him to quit, and his brother who is trying to “clean up the streets” by getting rid of the drug dealers and pimps. He later regrets the life

⁷²Quoted in *Reflections on Blaxploitation*, eds. David Walker, Andrew J. Rausch, Chris Watson (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009), p. 19.

he chose, as his mother, his best friend, and his favourite prostitute are all killed as a direct result of his criminal activities.

The racial antagonism and violence in these films are depicted directly through interactions between white working-class police officers and urban African Americans. This is reflective of much of the actual violent racial interactions throughout the country at the time. Throughout America during the late 1960s and early 1970s, many manufacturers moved out of urban centers. At the same time, many middle-class Americans left the cities to settle in suburbs. Working-class whites and blacks were left in the cities to compete for housing and jobs, leading to tension. So the potential for violence was particularly strong among urban working-class blacks and whites. Though there were many underlying issues causing tension,⁷³ when violence such as race riots did occur, it was often directly incited by confrontations between urban African Americans and white police officers. Furthermore, the police, who were most often white, were given the task of stemming such violence when it erupted. It is no wonder, therefore, that for many Black Nationalists, “the issue of black power often revolved around interactions with police.” Even the Black Panther Party’s official platform stated that it intended to bring an “immediate end to police brutality and the murder of black people.”⁷⁴ So, in real life, as in *Superfly* and *The Mack*, white police officers often acted as surrogates for white racists in

⁷³ Other contributing factors to resentment within African American urban communities included difficulty finding work (made worse by racist hiring policies of white employers), lack of suitable housing, and the slow pace of integration (i.e. the deterioration of policies meant to end de facto segregation). Even with all of these underlying factors, black residents of some urban communities in the late 1960s, including Watts, considered the white police force to be the “main problem facing Negroes.” See William McCord and John Howard, “Negro Opinions in Three Riot Cities,” *The American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 11, no. 4 (March, 1968), pp. 24-27.

⁷⁴ Danielle DeRuiter-Williams, “The Critical Nexus: Deindustrialization, Racism and Urban Crisis in Post-1967 Detroit,” *McNair Scholars Journal*, vol. 11, no. 1 (January, 2007), p. 29.

general.

Following our definition of film noir, both films use specific visual techniques to accentuate the mood of despair. In *Superfly*, for instance, there are examples of low-key lighting, notably in one scene in which Priest and Eddie meet with the corrupt narcotics officers to discuss business. After the police officers exit the scene, Priest and Eddie discuss the implications of the deal. Eddie is happy to go along with the cops and to keep making money because if he gets out of the business he has nothing else to turn to. He tells Priest that he too knows nothing besides dealing drugs and should thus continue dealing. Priest does not know how to respond. His face, covered in shadow, is only partially visible, which was a common technique used in noir which “usually symbolized some imprisonment of body or soul.”⁷⁵ The rest of the *mise-en-scene* is also largely covered in shadow, leaving the lit areas “seem[ingly] on the verge of being completely overwhelmed by the darkness that now threatens them from all sides.”⁷⁶

The Mack makes even greater use of low-key lighting techniques. The majority of the film is shot in this style. Most of the film, as well, takes place at night and is shot “night-for-night.” As Place and Peterson explain, shooting a nighttime scene at night instead of in the day (with the use of filters to give the impression of night) creates an effect of extra high contrast, as “the sky is rendered jet black, instead of the grey sky of day-for-night.”⁷⁷ In fact, one of the only scenes shot with high-key lighting and, for that matter, one of the only daytime scenes in the film, involves a picnic where Goldie and his

⁷⁵This quote is found in Place and Peterson, “Some Visual Motifs,” but is originally from Joel Greenberg and Charles Higham’s *Hollywood in the Forties*.

⁷⁶Place and Peterson, “Some Visual Motifs,” p. 67.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*

friends play baseball and eat together. This is also one of the only scenes not depicting criminal activity. It is the one scene in the film that displays “normalcy,” as Place and Peterson would have it, and one of the only scenes in which the mood of despair, and the accompanying low-key lighting, is absent.

Warner Brothers chose to distribute *Superfly*. At that time, Warners, like the other major Hollywood studios, was in financial trouble and desperate to recover.⁷⁸ *The Mack*, as well, was distributed by a major studio which was not financially stable. That studio was Cinerama Releasing Corporation (CRC), the distribution partner for the television network ABC's production unit, Circle Films. Between 1967 and 1972, the company had lost \$47 million dollars. Then in early 1973, the year *The Mack* was released, Circle films went out of business, causing CRC to survive solely on buying distribution rights for films which it did not finance.⁷⁹

To illustrate just how quickly the studios jumped on the blaxploitation bandwagon, Cook notes that at the end of 1972, *Variety* magazine listed fifty-one “black oriented” films that had been released or in production since 1970. In 1973, the number had increased to more than 100.⁸⁰ George Gent of the *New York Times* described the situation succinctly in 1972, writing that “[b]lack films designed primarily to attract black audiences are in and... most of them are showing profit.”⁸¹ Indeed, it was this financial success which led studio bosses to finance and distribute films featuring black

⁷⁸ Will McKinley, “Screening Report: *Superfly* (1972) 40th Anniversary Celebration at Museum of Moving Images,” accessed August 4, 2013, available from <http://willmckinley.wordpress.com/2013/08/18/screening-report-super-fly-1972-40th-anniversary-celebration-at-museum-of-the-moving-image/>.

⁷⁹ Cook, *Lost Illusions*, p. 333.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁸¹ George Gent, “Black Films Are In, So Are Profits,” *New York Times*, July 18, 1972.

protagonists and an excess of racial tension, as these were the types of films which were popular with urban African Americans and allowed the studios to make money when they were desperately in need of it.

To reiterate, the studios initially approached the controversial subject matter that would become common in blaxploitation films with caution. But as soon as filmgoers proved receptive to such content, the studios were happy to finance and/or distribute them. As Martin Scorsese asserts, “[m]ovies are a medium based on consensus. Now, in the old days you dealt with moguls and major studios. Today, you have executives and giant corporations instead. But one iron rule remains the same: Every decision is shaped by the money-men's perception of what the audience wants.”⁸² As one African-American movie producer said in 1972 in reference to blaxploitation films, “[w]hite filmmakers aren't really seeing black; they're seeing black and green.”⁸³

Good evidence of the appeal of black-oriented exploitation films is AIP producer Roger Corman's reaction to Martin Scorsese's request for him to fund *Mean Streets*. Corman's brother had just produced a blaxploitation remake of the classical film noir *The Asphalt Jungle* called *Cool Breeze*, which was very successful. Corman, who liked Scorsese's script, told Scorsese that he would give him \$150,000 to go to New York and make the film on the condition that, as Scorsese puts it, he “swing a little bit and make it all black.”⁸⁴ Corman himself has said of the script that “I liked it, but at that time the black films were really very successful. I'd been thinking that I wanted to make a black film and

⁸² *A Personal Journey with Martin Scorsese through American Movies*, directed by Martin Scorsese and Michael Henry Wilson (London: British Film Institute, 1995).

⁸³ Jack Jordan, quoted in George Gent, “Black Films Are In, So Are Profits,” *New York Times*, 1972.

⁸⁴ “Scorsese on the Genesis of Mean Streets,” accessed November 10, 2013, available from <http://hellenicantidote.blogspot.ca/2013/05/scorsese-on-genesis-of-mean-streets.html>.

I thought, this film would really work well as a black film.”⁸⁵

Money, therefore, was the primary motivating factor in the industry’s move toward depicting racial conflict in films targeted primarily at a black audience in the early 1970s. With the movement of whites into suburban areas and away from major urban theatres, and the migration of African Americans to the North, especially to large cities, and therefore close to urban theatres, the ratio of black-to-white moviegoers began to shift in the favour of the former. Massood points out that by the early 1970s, “the black box office generated somewhere between 30 and 40 percent of the total American box office.”⁸⁶ With this in mind, and with the success of the new black action films, the studios were convinced that creating films aimed at a young black audience would provide some much needed income.⁸⁷ Indeed, the movie industry had actually become aware by the 1960s that there was a growing African-American urban audience.⁸⁸

The blaxploitation cycle ended in the mid-1970s, largely because of organizations like CORE, the NAACP, and the SCLC which spoke out against what they believed was a negative image of African Americans depicted in these films. One commentator from the NAACP even described the negative effects of these films as amounting to “cultural genocide” and demanded that the black community “deal with this problem by whatever

⁸⁵ Andrew J. Rauch, “Roger Corman: On *The Blair Witch Project* and Why *Mean Streets* Would Have Made a Good Blaxploitation Film,” accessed November 10, 2013, available from <http://www.imagesjournal.com/issue09/features/rogercorman/>.

⁸⁶ Massood, *Black City Cinema*, p. 82.

⁸⁷ Reid, “The Black Action Film,” p. 29.

⁸⁸ Thomas Cripps, “*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and the Changing Politics of Genre Film,” in *Close Viewings: An Anthology of Film Criticism*, ed. Peter Lehman (Tallahassee: The Florida State University Press, 1990), p. 242.

means necessary."⁸⁹ These groups threatened to "[hit] the industry in the pocketbook" through public demonstrations and picketing theatres and shooting locations.⁹⁰ At the same time, studios were realizing the potential of blockbusters like *The Godfather*(1972) and *The Exorcist*(1973), whose audiences were 35 per cent black. Hollywood executives, therefore, were convinced that it no longer needed to make films targeting an African-American audience specifically, but could make cross-over films aimed at both black and white audiences, potentially double their profits at the box-office, and also avoid the criticism which blaxploitation films were attracting.⁹¹ Hollywood movies of the late 1970s, even when they featured African Americans among the primary cast, tended to be aimed at a white or cross-over audiences.

Since the controversy over D. W. Griffith's racist epic *Birth of a Nation* in 1915, studios have been wary about presenting African-American characters as villains. This was also true of Hollywood films of the 1970s. While racist characters were necessary under some circumstances, as they were in the message films of the 1950s, these were unsympathetic characters which were placed in the film as obstacles for the protagonists to overcome. In blaxploitation films of the 1970s, these characters were almost always present. Indeed, the black superhero needed a nemesis. But racist antagonists were not restricted to the blaxploitation cycle.

When a film's protagonist showed signs of racism in this era, he was often an anti-hero type. That is, the audience knew that these characters were not necessarily "good"

⁸⁹ Quoted in Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 101.

⁹⁰ Steve Toy, "NAACP and CORE Hit the Black Capers; Distortion of Race Lifestyle; Black Brokers Serve With White Cos.," *Variety*, August 23, 1972, p. 5.

⁹¹ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 105.

people, or that they had deep character flaws. A racist character, like TV's Archie Bunker, may have even been likable on some level, but the audience was meant to be aware of their flaws and did not necessarily agree with that character's opinions and ideologies. As Paul Schrader, screenwriter of *Taxi Driver*, states, "there is a difference between making a movie about a racist and making a racist movie."⁹²

The post-war period was a tumultuous time for Hollywood. De-urbanization, changing leisure activities, and the growing popularity of television, all contributed to Hollywood's financial troubles. Additionally, the Paramount Decision made it necessary to change the way the entire industry operated. In their desperate search for a new audience, by the 1960s the industry was willing for the first time to create niche films for specific groups, notably urban African Americans who had become politicized by Black Nationalism. They enjoyed films featuring urban African Americans who were not afraid to stand up to the white establishment. Once Hollywood realized the profitability of films featuring such characters, it began to make them in droves, especially after *Sweetback* revealed that they could be made cheaply and still bring in a tremendous profit. *Superfly* and *The Mack* serve as examples of these low-budget blaxploitation films, which were made in the noir tradition. These were films which featured small-time black criminals who experienced psychological turmoil due to pressures placed on them by racist working-class white police officers. This racial antagonism makes these noirs different from noirs of the classical period.

⁹²Amy Taubin, *Taxi Driver* (London: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2012), pp. 22, 23.

Chapter 3: Realism and *Mean Streets*(1973)

As we have seen, the collapse of the studio system and the search for a new audience led to experimentation with film content. In their search for a film formula to attract new audiences, studios began to hire a new generation of directors to whom they granted unprecedented freedom. This was a very cine-literate group, inspired by European cinema, including French poetic realism, Italian neorealism, French New Wave, as well as American documentary realism. They were also influenced by classical film noir. Their films, therefore, were often personal and auto-biographical and resembled noirs of the 1940s and 1950s. Because racial antagonism between blacks and whites was a social reality, one experienced by directors interested in depicting realistic characters and situations, their films sometimes contained racist characters. One such film is the neo-noir *Mean Streets*.

Mean Streets, written and directed by Martin Scorsese, was an independently produced, low-budget film about the lives of several small-time gangsters in New York's Little Italy. The film centres on Charlie, who works for his mafioso uncle. Charlie is a devout Roman Catholic who believes that one must "make-up for his sins in the streets." He thinks that it is God's will for him to do penance by looking out for his hot-headed friend, Johnny Boy, who has trouble paying off his many debts and cannot seem to stay out of trouble. In the end Charlie pays for Johnny Boy's sins as well, as both of them and Charlie's girlfriend are victims of a violent attack by Johnny Boy's loan shark.

The film fits our definition of film noir, as it is a criminal melodrama which focuses on the protagonist's feelings of guilt. Roger Ebert, in fact, believes that the film

“is not primarily about punk gangsters at all, but about living in a state of sin.” Driven by his Catholicism, Charlie is concerned with “rigid ground rules” which “inspired dread of eternal suffering if a sinner died without absolution.”¹ The exact source of Charlie’s guilt is never revealed directly, though it may stem from his involvement with the mafia. Charlie knows that if he remains loyal to his uncle he will have an easy life, as he has plans to take over his uncle’s restaurant business and would likely continue to have support from powerful mafia bosses. Charlie aspires to be like his hero, St. Francis of Assisi, but when his girlfriend tells him that “St. Francis didn’t run numbers,” Charlie denies that he is involved in such activities. Charlie seems to know that what he is doing is not acceptable, that it is not moral to be a gangster, and he struggles with this dilemma.

Ebert, however, believes that the source of Charlie’s guilt has more to do with his lust for women. “[A]ny woman he feels lust for,” according to Ebert, “represents a possible occasion for sin.” He points out that after dancing with a stripper, Charlie “goes to the bar. Lights a match and holds his finger above it—instant penance.”² This type of analysis which focuses on Charlie’s Catholicism is typical of the current scholarship on the film.³ This thesis will examine the film from a different vantage point: that of race relations and social class.

¹Roger Ebert, “Mean Streets,” accessed July 10, 2014, available from <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-mean-streets-1973>.

²*Ibid.*

³See David Denby, “*Mean Streets*: The Sweetness of Hell,” *Sight and Sound*, vol. 43, no. 1 (Winter, 1973/74), pp. 48-50; James F. Maxfield, “The Worst Part: Martin Scorsese’s *Mean Streets*,” *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 4 (October, 1995), pp. 279-286; Richard Blake, “Redeemed in Blood: The Sacramental Universe of Martin Scorsese,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 24, no. 1 (Spring, 1996), pp. 2-9.

What is perhaps more significant than Charlie's Catholic guilt over his lust for women is the fact that the stripper, Diane, is an African American. As we will see, some members of the Italian-Americans community in New York were racist towards African Americans. Therefore, not only was Charlie lusting after a woman other than his girlfriend, but he was attracted to a woman whose race made her unacceptable in the eyes of his peers. In fact, although it never amounts to any violent confrontation as it did in blaxploitation films, there are several obvious examples in the film of racism directed toward African Americans. The reason for the presence of this racism has much to do with Scorsese's personal life and the "New Hollywood" influences which shaped his style of filmmaking.

At the end of the 1960s, when the studios were still struggling financially, the success of several pictures provided some hope. These films appealed to a youthful audience and were much different in their narratives and styles from the failing blockbusters that the studios had been making, as they eschewed many of the established aesthetic techniques of classical Hollywood and were much more open in their depictions of sex and violence. What allowed for this change in content was the dismantling of the Production Code Administration and its subsequent replacement by the Motion Picture Association of America Rating System, which made it possible for films to be made which did not have to cater to an undifferentiated audience. The new rating system allowed potential spectators to judge whether the films they wanted to see would be appropriate based on their ratings, thus granting filmmakers freedom to add more sex and violence and other controversial content to their films.

Inspired by the success of *Bonnie and Clyde*(1967) and *The Graduate*(1967), as well as the low-budget, independently produced *Easy Rider*(1969) and a 1968 survey commissioned by the MPAA which indicated that 48 percent of the movie-going audience was between 16-24 years of age, studios began to look to a new generation of young filmmakers to make movies for a younger audience. As filmmaker Paul Mazursky observed, those in charge in Hollywood began to realize that “young directors knew something they didn't know, which was, maybe, what audiences were looking for.”⁴

These new filmmakers were of two sorts. One group had grown up during the Depression and had been working in Hollywood for some time, but had never been given the chance to direct big-budget pictures due to their unorthodox style of filmmaking.⁵ The other group was younger, born after World War II, and were mostly graduates of film schools in Los Angeles or New York. After the success of those youth oriented films mentioned above, studio bosses were convinced that these filmmakers could make “inexpensive films... specifically for the youth market and that they could become blockbusters overnight.”⁶

In the early 1970s, studio executives often gave directors the freedom to make films with minimal interference. At Universal Studios, for instance, there was an entire youth division set up. The directors working in that department were given a budget of \$750,000 and according to producer Ned Tannen, were told "It's your movie, don't come

⁴ Statistics are from David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 68; Paul Mazursky, interview from *A Decade Under the Influence*, directed by Ted Demme and Richard LaGravenese (New York: Independent Film Channel, 2003).

⁵ Cook, *Lost Illusions*, pp. 71-72.

⁶ David A. Cook, “Auteur Cinema and the 'Film Generation' in 1970s Hollywood,” in *The New American Cinema*, ed. Jon Lewis (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 13.

back to us with your problems, we don't want to know about them," and were left alone to make their films as they pleased.⁷ The films they produced were not only more violent, more sexually explicit, and more filled with foul language than those of any previous generation, they were also more explicitly political. The late 1960s and 1970s, therefore, marked a special era in Hollywood filmmaking where the director gained more autonomy from the studios and was able to produce personal films.⁸ For these reasons, this period came to be called the Hollywood Renaissance.

While Hollywood was losing money by investing in unsuccessful high budget spectacles in the 1950s and 1960s, filmmakers in Europe, especially in France, who were connoisseurs of classic American films had been experimenting with new filmmaking techniques. They broke away from the Classical Hollywood style⁹ and incorporated other stylistic elements and themes, some of them from American film noir, which Hollywood filmmakers had abandoned by the 1960s.¹⁰ French New Wave directors,¹¹ many of whom started out as film critics and theorists, wrote about the "furious springtime of world cinema," by which they meant that films should not just provide thoughtless escapism but

⁷ Biskind, *Easy Riders*, p. 126.

⁸ Paul Mazursky, interview from *A Decade under the Influence*.

⁹ This was the style of filmmaking which was common from the beginning of sound era to the early 1960s. Classical Hollywood films contained linear narratives, goal-oriented protagonists, and recognizable character types. A classical Hollywood film was edited in a continuous, or invisible, fashion, as not to draw attention to itself. For a full explanation of what the classical Hollywood style encompasses see David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classic Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985).

¹⁰ Martin, *Mean Streets*, pp. 22-23.

¹¹ These were filmmakers from the 1950s and 1960s who were connoisseurs of classical Hollywood films, but whose movies broke away from the classical Hollywood style. Their films often forewent continuity editing, linear narratives, and the like, and were steeped in social realism.

should put forth a message to its audience. Their films provided inspiration to the new Hollywood directors like Scorsese.¹²

Inspired by these European filmmakers, Hollywood Renaissance directors made films that were both personal and political, and which appealed to politically minded American youth.¹³ David Newman, one of the screenwriters of *Bonnie and Clyde*, admits that in the 1960s there was a sense that “being an outlaw was a great thing to want to be, whether it was Clyde Barrow or Abbie Hoffman. All the stuff we wrote has to do with *epater le bourgeois*, shaking society up, saying to all the squares, ‘We don’t do that man, we do our own thing’.”¹⁴ Just as blaxploitation films appealed to a militant African-American youth, the politics of such films as *Bonnie and Clyde* appealed to an even broader, politicized youth audience. The popularity of these films with American youth was one of the primary reasons Martin Scorsese was given the opportunity to release *Mean Streets* under the banner of a major Hollywood studio.

Many young Americans in the 1960s were part of the counterculture, which, according to Doug Rossinow, refers to a broad set of “values, visual styles, social practices, and institutions that were widely disparate but considered by most to be unified in their rebellion against the dominant culture of advanced industrial capitalism, or even against a broader regime.”¹⁵ The counterculture is basically an umbrella term which encompasses several 1960s “movements,” including the New Left, the Civil Rights movement, anti-

¹² Lawrence L. Murray, “Hollywood Nihilism, and the Youth Culture of the Sixties: *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967),” in *American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image*, ed. John E. O’Connor and Martin A. Jackson (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing, 1979), p. 239.

¹³ Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, p. 301.

¹⁴ David Newman, quoted in Biskind, *Easy Riders*, p. 27.

¹⁵ Rossinow, “The New Left,” p. 79.

war protests and Black Nationalism. Though only a minority of 1960s youth took a radical stance, a “distinctive and significant youth culture” emerged based around such ideas.¹⁶ But Hollywood took a while to catch on to the tastes of the youth audience which wanted its concerns visualized in movies.

Making films about issues which appealed to the counterculture was one of the primary objectives of the producers of *Easy Rider* Bert Schneider and Bob Rafelson, who had set up their own production company, BBS Productions. They produced several iconic counterculture films in addition to *Easy Rider*, including *Five Easy Pieces* (1969) and *The Last Picture Show* (1971). Henry Jaglom, who worked on *Easy Rider* and who knew Schneider, had this to say about BBS and those who worked under its banner: “We wanted to have film reflect our lives, the anxiety that was going on as a result of the war, the cultural changes that we were all products of.” Before *Easy Rider*, counterculture youth had not seen people like themselves depicted accurately on screen. As Dennis Hopper explains, “[a]t every love-in across the country people were smoking grass and dropping LSD, while audiences were still watching Doris Day and Rock Hudson... Nobody [involved in the counterculture] had ever seen themselves portrayed in a movie.”¹⁷

Easy Rider had great influence on the types of movies produced and distributed by the major studios until about the mid-1970s. According to Peter Guber, “[e]verything seemed different after *Easy Rider*. The executives were anxious, frightened because they

¹⁶Theresa Richardson, “The Rise of Youth Counter Culture after World War II and the Popularization of Historical Knowledge: Then and Now” (Paper presented at the Historical Society annual meeting “Popularizing Historical Knowledge: Practice, Prospects and Perils,” Columbia, South Carolina, May 31 - June 2, 2012).

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 77, 53.

did not have the answers any longer. You couldn't imitate or mimic quite as easily, churn them out like eggs from a chicken. Every day, there was a new person being fired.”¹⁸ But this situation was a godsend for the young filmmakers like Scorsese who just some years earlier had trouble gaining a foothold in Hollywood.

Even before the success of *Easy Rider*, the heads of the conglomerates had fired many of the old executives and put in place new ones who were given orders to find and exploit the youth audience.¹⁹ At Paramount, for instance, Bludhorn installed as the new head of production Robert Evans, who took the position on the condition that his friend Peter Bart also work as a top executive and personal advisor to him. While over-ambitious conglomerate heads like Bludhorn were responsible for some of the era's biggest flops,²⁰ the new executives delivered many big hits. They were generally younger and more in touch with the tastes of the new generation of filmgoers. Peter Bart has admitted that his goal as producer at Paramount was to ignore “the voices of the past” and to “find the unexpected.”²¹ Those in charge at MGM hired the relatively young Louis F. Polk because they believed he was more in-touch with the youth market. Polk admits that his goal was “to meet what the younger people of our society are demanding from the filmmaker by introducing stimulating and challenging as well as entertaining productions

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁹ Barry Langford, *Post-Classical Hollywood: Film Industry, Story, and Style since 1945* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 114.

²⁰ Despite having no prior experience in the film business, Bludhorn believed that he knew what audiences were interested in seeing. This led him to ignore the advice of his advisors and fund big budget musicals which were out of fashion by the late 1960s, causing Paramount to lose money. See Bart, *Infamous Players*, pp. 48, 50.

²¹ Bart, *Infamous Players*, pp. 117-121.

at a profit commensurate with the stockholders' expectations."²² Warner Brothers, the distributor of *Mean Streets*, also followed this trend, resulting in John Calley being hired as head of production. It was Calley who was directly responsible for the decision to pick up Scorsese's low-budget, independent film for distribution.

The directors that rose to prominence during the late 1960s and early 1970s were largely influenced by European art cinema, notably Italian neorealism and French New Wave, as well as American documentary realism from the immediate postwar period. Scorsese was first introduced to Italian neorealism as a child. He would sit with his mother and grandmother "every other Friday night" and watch films by the likes of Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini on his family's television set.²³ Later, while attending New York University, Scorsese was inspired by one of his professors, Haig Manoogian, who "transmitted the spark to me," as Scorsese puts it, and "gave me the energy to become a filmmaker."²⁴ Manoogian taught his students to "make films about their own lives, what they knew." The young director took this advice to heart, leading him to make *Mean Streets*.²⁵ Manoogian "gave me a great gift," says Scorsese, and "made me see the value of my experience."²⁶

Maurizio Viano points out that Martin Scorsese was influenced by both expressionism and realism, and argues that his films represent "a most interesting case of

²² Louis F. Polk, quoted in Aniko Bodroghkozy, "Reel Revolutionaries: An Examination of Hollywood's Cycle of 1960s Youth Rebellion Films," *Cinema Journal*, vol. 41, no. 3 (Spring, 2002), p. 39.

²³ Interview with Martin Scorsese by Paul Schrader, originally printed in *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1982, reprinted in Paul Schrader, *Taxi Driver* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. xi.

²⁴ Scorsese, quoted in an interview in Michael Henry, "Raging Bull," in *Martin Scorsese: Interviews*, ed. Peter Brunetter (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), p. 99.

²⁵ Biskind, *Easy Riders*, pp. 227, 250.

²⁶ Scorsese, quoted in Mary Pat Kelly, *Martin Scorsese: A Journey* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), p. 39.

expressionist realism.”²⁷ Professor Michael Delahoyde describes these two concepts succinctly:

Realistic films attempt to reproduce the surface of reality with a minimum of distortion. The illusion is that their film world is unmanipulated, but even selectivity itself is a crafting of the art. However unobtrusive, Realism is still a style; but the interest is in what's being shown, the content, rather than the created effect, the form.... Expressionist directors are concerned more with an unabashedly subjective experience of reality, not how others might see it. Psychological or spiritual truths they feel can best be conveyed by distorting the surface of the material world. This reforming of reality can involve a high degree of manipulation, and the emphasis here is on the form rather than the content, at least as compared to Realism.²⁸

By this definition, it would seem impossible for a filmmaker to use both expressionism and realism together, as one is essentially the opposite of the other. But Scorsese is able to do so by using aesthetic techniques of expressionism to depict stories which reflect realistic situations, particularly sociological interactions that he is familiar with from his own personal experiences. Furthermore, Scorsese engages in location shooting, which is another marker of both Italian neorealism and American documentary realism.²⁹

Some of the expressionist techniques Scorsese uses are akin to those same aesthetic techniques of film noir, notably low-key lighting. But Scorsese adds a new spin to the old techniques by playing with colour. For instance, in *Mean Streets* he adds a red

²⁷ Stephanie Hull and Maurizio Viano, "The Images of Blacks in the Work of Coppola, De Palma, and Scorsese," in *Beyond the Margin: Readings in Italian Americana*, eds. Paolo A. Giordano and Anthony Julian Tamburri (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998), p. 186.

²⁸ Michael Delahoyde, "Expressionism in Film," *Washington State University*, accessed August 5, 2013, available from <http://public.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/20th/expressionistfilm.html>.

²⁹ Scorsese's own definition of classical film noir reveals the same dynamic: "First and foremost film noir is a style. It combined realism and expressionism; The use of real locations and elaborate shadow-plays." He admits that as a student he had used a textbook by influential film noir cinematographers John Alton. See *A Journey Through American Movies with Martin Scorsese*; It should also be noted that for financial reasons, *Mean Streets* was only partially shot on location in New York, where Scorsese took six days to shoot the footage which he could not get in Los Angeles. See Kelly, *Martin Scorsese*, p. 69.

hue to the scenes taking place in the bar. This technique, according to Ebert, “suggests [Charlie’s] slanted moral view. The real world is shot in ordinary colors, but when Charlie descends into the bar... it is always bathed in red, the color of sex, blood and guilt.”³⁰ The low-key lighting and red hue are, therefore, used to accentuate the mood of despair and psychological condition of the film’s protagonist, as they were in classical film noir.

His use of expressionistic techniques demonstrates that Scorsese is willing to deviate from a completely realistic portrayal of life. When asked by Roger Ebert about his movies’ “stylized, expressionistic” look, Scorsese responded that he is “not interested in a realistic look—not at all, not ever. Every film should look the way I feel.”³¹ He is thus willing to forego realism in terms of the way his films look, while at the same time retaining real depictions of life as he knew it. His films, therefore, differ from the films of Italian neorealists in terms of aesthetics, but are similar in terms of their portrayal of life “as it was.”

Scorsese is also willing to deviate from an entirely realistic narrative by adding “unrealistic” elements to the story for poetic or metaphorical purposes. But these metaphors are actually meant to reveal something about the psyche of the characters in his films, which were often based on real people. A good example can be found in *Mean Streets* when Tony, the owner of the local bar and primary hangout of the protagonists, reveals to his friends that he has in his possession two panther cubs which he keeps in large kennels in the back. He admits that he wanted to get a Tiger—“A little William Blake and all that.” Scorsese says that “I didn’t invent the panthers in the backroom, but

³⁰ Ebert, “*Mean Streets*.”

³¹ Ebert, “Interview with Martin Scorsese,” March 7, 1976, accessed August 5, 2013, available from <http://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/interview-with-martin-scorsese>.

they shouldn't be taken literally either.” When asked by an interviewer whether the panthers were “[m]ore like a metaphor for the male character,” the director responds in the affirmative.³² Scorsese's films are, therefore, often not only personal but also semi-autobiographical, and while he wishes to depict social reality in his films, he is not opposed to using “unrealistic” aesthetic techniques and narrative elements. But these unrealistic elements are often meant to reveal something about his characters that are based on real people, thereby enhancing, in a sense, the reality of the narrative. This type of realism is what Scorsese calls “quote-unquote realistic.”³³

Another technique used by Scorsese to reveal the thoughts and feelings of his protagonists is one which was common in classical film noir: the voice-over. In fact, the film starts with a voice-over of Scorsese saying “you don’t make up for your sins in Church, you do it in the streets, you do it at home. The rest is bullshit and you know it!” Directly after this we see Charlie awaken from a troubled sleep, just as Charlie Davis had in *Body and Soul*. In this way, the mood of despair and the troubled psychological condition of the protagonist are established from the outset.

Voice-overs continue throughout the film, as Charlie reveals to the spectator just what is on his mind. For instance, as Johnny Boy walks into the bar, we hear Charlie speak these words in a voice-over: “Alright. Ok. Thanks a lot Lord for opening my eyes. I talk about penance and you send this through the door. Well we play by your rules don’t

³² Martin Scorsese, *Scorsese on Scorsese*, eds. David Thompson and Ian Christie (Boston: Faber, 1989), p. 23; The exact implications of the panther/tiger is not clear, but it seems to allude, again, to a physiological/moral dilemma. Blake, in “Songs of Innocence and Experience” pondered the existence of good and evil in the world, and in his famous poem “The Tyger” asked whether the Creator could have created both the tiger and the lamb (i.e. good and evil, or innocence and experience). The struggle to keep acting “innocently,” or rightly, in a world filled with evil and temptation is what troubles Charlie and, indeed, most other noir protagonists by our definition.

³³ *Ibid.*

we. Well... don't we."In this way we know exactly what Charlie is thinking. In fact, this type of narration, according to Paul Schrader, was one of the classical noir techniques used to create a mood of "all-enveloping-hopelessness."³⁴This narration certainly does create a mood of anxiety and exposes the troubled soul of the protagonist.

This expressionistic/realistic style was the type of filmmaking which Scorsese engaged in from his time as a film student at New York University. His 1963 student film, *It's Not Just You Murray*, started out, according to Scorsese, as a film about two friends in Little Italy who "live the way I myself was living with my buddies" but which "turned into a biography of a gangster... based to some extent on the lives of my uncles." The film "also has documentary value" because Scorsese and his crew shot it "in the cellars, bars, and slums of Little Italy." He also shot his first feature, *Who's That Knockin' at My Door* (1967), primarily on location in Little Italy, and "[e]very incident" in that film "was autobiographical."³⁵ Scorsese's friend and co-writer of *Mean Streets*, Mardik Martin, believes that the reason Scorsese's written dialogue works so well is that the characters in his films, especially his early ones, are based on real people. These characters act and speak like people from Scorsese's old neighbourhood.³⁶ Robert De Niro, who grew up in the same neighbourhood as Scorsese, claims that when he saw *Who's That Knockin'* for the first time he thought to himself that "[h]e did this about the neighbourhood, and he really understands it."³⁷

³⁴ Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir," p. 11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28, 30.

³⁶ *From the Classroom to the Streets: The Making of Who's That Knocking at My Door*, produced by Stephen Altobello (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers, 2004).

³⁷ Andy Dougan, *Untouchable: A Biography of Robert De Niro* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1996), p. 6.

One of the most immediate consequences of Scorsese's realist influences is that his narratives reveal the prejudices of its subjects, which are, in the case of *Mean Streets*, the Italian-American community of New York's Little Italy.³⁸ Film critic Guy Flatley made a similar observation in 1973, pointing out that both *Who's That Knockin' at My Door* and *Mean Streets* “probed the psyche of a sensitive young Italian-American drifter, an emotional cripple whose relationships were poisoned by prejudice.”³⁹ Both of these characters, J.R in *Who's That Knockin'* and Charlie in *Mean Streets*, played by Harvey Keitel, are based on Scorsese himself.

Scorsese certainly felt as if he had achieved the realism which he set out to portray. In reference to a scene in which Johnny Boy is talking to Charlie, Scorsese had this to say: “I felt that anyone could just take this sequence and later on, forty years from now, look at it and really see how we lived, just that one little sequence. You could see it from the whole film too. I mean... *Mean Streets* was obviously not *The Godfather*, it was the real day to day life of what we had, what we lived through, my friends and I.” Scorsese has said that “if somebody picks up this movie twenty years from now they'll see what Italian Americans look and talk like,”⁴⁰ even calling his film “an anthropological study” of the behaviours of Italian-American New Yorkers.⁴¹

Speaking about the racism depicted in his films, Scorsese explains that “It's the ghetto that creates prejudice,” citing the following story as an example:

³⁸ Viano makes this same point in “The Image,” p. 187.

³⁹ Guy Flatley, “He Has Often Walked These Mean Streets,” in *Martin Scorsese: Interviews*, p. 5.

⁴⁰ Scorsese speaking to Paul Schrader, cited in Schrader, *Taxi Driver*, p. xiv.

⁴¹ Scorsese, quoted in Anthony Descurtis, “What the Streets Mean,” in *Martin Scorsese: Interviews*, p. 162.

when I was 5 and my brother was 12, we were walking down the street one day and we saw a big crowd of people. They were standing around a man who had fallen, and his head was bleeding. My brother took a look at him, and then he turned to me and said, 'Oh, he's only a Jew'. And that is one of my earliest memories.

Scorsese then goes on to explain that they “hated the Irish too because of the Fifth Precinct,” where the majority of the policemen were of Irish descent. They “were always drinking, and always had their hands out,” and Scorsese and his friends “used to bribe them so we could play stickball in the street.” It was so bad that “it was unheard of for any of us to call a cop, unless it was to give them some graft.”⁴²

There is a scene in *Mean Streets* in which a policeman, after breaking up a fight between Charlie's gang and some hoods who owe them money, presses them for a bribe. The cop, however, is not Irish but African American. This is fitting, as many Italian Americans, Scorsese and his friends included, also expressed bigotry toward the African-American community. Racism, of course, was not unique to Italian Americans. It was prevalent throughout American society in the early 1970s, just as it had been since the country's inception. Racism among the white working class, however, was particularly strong, as issues which caused prejudices affected that class more directly and powerfully than they did the middle class.

Take, for example, the 1969 *New York Magazine* article by Pete Hamill titled “The Revolt of the Lower Middle Class.” Hamill, unlike many middle-class people, frequented working-class bars in New York and had friends there. He did not become a journalist until later in life, and until then he worked blue-collar jobs. So Hamill had more

⁴² Scorsese, quoted in Flatley, “He Has Often Walked,” pp. 5-6.

familiarity with the working class than one would expect a typical journalist to have. He writes in the article about the “real and deep” grievances of the blue-collar men of New York. He quotes one man at a local bar who had the following to say:

None of them politicians gives a good goddam. All they worry about is the niggers. And everything is for the niggers. The niggers get the schools. The niggers go to summer camp. The niggers get the new playgrounds. The niggers get nursery schools. And they get it all without workin'. I'm an ironworker, a connector; when I go to work in the mornin', I don't even know if I'm gonna make it back. My wife is scared to death, every mornin', all day. Up on the iron, if the wind blows hard or the steel gets icy or I make a wrong step, bango, forget it, I'm dead. Who feeds my wife and kid if I'm dead? Lindsay? The poverty program? You know the answer: nobody. But the niggers, they don't worry about it. They take the welfare and sit out on the stoop drinkin' cheap wine and throwin' the bottles on the street. They never gotta walk outta the house. They take the money outta my paycheck and they just turn it over to some lazy son of a bitch who won't work. I gotta carry him on my back. You know what I am? I'm a sucker. I really am. You shouldn't have to put up with this. And I'll tell yasomethin'. There's a lotta people who just ain'tgonna put up with it much longer.⁴³

This angry speech demonstrates the frustration of the working class and the way in which they displaced much of their anger on African Americans, as well as on the government and on the middle class.

Many working-class whites in the 1970s believed that while they worked very hard to makes ends meet, minority groups got a free ride by accepting government assistance. Rising taxes were cutting into their income in a big way, and they were not seeing any wealth being redistributed in their favour. On the other hand, they believed that African Americans were getting a handout from government welfare programs and essentially living off of the hard earned income of the white working class. The middle

⁴³ Pete Hamill, "The Revolt of the White Lower Middle Class," *New York Magazine*, April 19, 1969, n.p., accessed November 9, 2012, available from <http://nymag.com/news/features/46801/>.

class, who often worked for and within the government, became a target of their frustration as well. But African Americans attracted the brunt of working-class anger.⁴⁴

Sociologist E. E. LeMasters frequented a blue-collar tavern from 1967 to 1972 in a "participant-observer" experiment to "record and analyze different facets of the [working class]." His findings are very similar to those of Hamill. He found that the men who visited the tavern regularly resented welfare recipients, whom they considered to be lazy. They also disliked student protestors, whom they simply did not understand, and the middle and upper classes who did not share their values and whom they did not trust. However, the "most explosive issue" among these men, besides the Vietnam War, was race.⁴⁵ These men were mostly of German-American heritage, but their views were representative of other ethnic groups, including Italian Americans.

Maurizio Viano is a native Italian who has lived in the United States since 1977. Viano argues that race relations between Italian Americans and African American were unique and distinguishable from relations between African Americans and other white ethnic groups. He traces racial tensions between those two groups back to the immediate post-Civil War years, when many poor Italians came to America for work and were hired by plantation owners to replace the lost labour from the freed slaves. "In some of the big cities of the northern United States," he argues, "the urban territories inhabited by blacks and Italian-Americans have been adjacent, equally on the margin, so they engender the typical friction between underdogs."⁴⁶ Whether or not this is the reason for the racial

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ E. E. LeMasters, *Blue-Collar Aristocrats: Life-Styles at a Working-Class Tavern* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), pp. 3, 178-179, 187-188.

⁴⁶ Hull and Viano, "The Image," p. 170.

views of Italian Americans is debatable. The fact is, though, that there was resentment in that community towards African Americans, something to which Scorsese admits.

Viano calls *Mean Streets* “the film in which Scorsese most explicitly touches on the theme of racial prejudice within the Italian/American community.”⁴⁷ This can be detected in several scenes. For instance, early in the film, Charlie admits in a voice-over that he is physically attracted to an exotic dancer, Diane, as he watches her perform in his friend Tony’s bar. “You know something,” Charlie says reflectively to himself, “she is really good looking. But she’s black. You can see that real plain, right? But there isn’t much of a difference anyway, is there? Well, *is there?*” In the Italian-American community of New York in the 1970s, it was not appropriate for a white male to act on his attraction to a black woman. This is made clear later in the film, in two particular scenes.

At Tony’s bar, Charlie’s friend Michael is bragging to another friend about a girl with whom he had relations. Michael proudly shows her photo and explains that she is not only good looking, but intelligent too. Just then, Tony comes out of the washroom, asks to see the photo, and says that he knows the girl. He laughs and says he “seen her kissing a nigger under a bridge in Jersey.” Michael’s other colleague laughs at the thought of this and Michael, clearly distraught, responds, “What are you talkin’ about?... What do you mean kissing?” Tony rolls his eyes and says “I mean kissing; her lips on his lips.” Michael then makes a face to show his disgust at the thought of having relations, not with a black girl, but with a white girl who had previously kissed a black man. In the original screenplay, this disgust is made even more explicit. After Tony explains to Michael that

⁴⁷Hull and Viano, “The Image,” p. 188.

he saw his girl with the black man, "Michael grimaces in shock. He spits." Then he responds "You sure?... a nigger... and I kissed her." Then he "wipes his lips."⁴⁸

In another scene, Charlie, after arranging to meet with Diane, rides in a cab on his way to see her. When he sees Diane waiting for him, Charlie says in a voice-over: "are you crazy? That's all I need now, to get caught in the village with a [black woman]." He then tells the driver to turn back. Viano explains the implications of this scene:

Given the autobiographical dimensions of Charlie's character, this sequence suggests Scorsese's awareness of not being immune from visceral, prerational racism himself. It is as if Scorsese wanted to exorcise the knowledge that he, too, takes part in racial prejudice simply because racism, just like sexual desire, is part of the cultural 'duty' of Italian Americans.⁴⁹

While Viano fails to provide evidence of this, Scorsese himself admitted to this kind of racial antagonism in an interview for the *Village Voice* in 1976. When asked about this scene, Scorsese says "You gotta realize where these guys are coming from. We were brought up that way," Scorsese explains. He continues, "how do you say 'Oh, I mean, in the Italian-American neighbourhood I never heard the word 'Nigger'. Never.... I mean, that's not true. It just isn't true." Then he told the interviewer that "if you're gonna put something up there about yourself you might as well try to do it as honestly as possible."⁵⁰ Race relations between African and Italian Americans were, therefore, portrayed negatively in *Mean Streets* because of Scorsese's desire to make personal and autobiographical films and because racism against blacks was a reality in his community.

⁴⁸ Martin Scorsese and Mardik Martin, *Mean Streets: An Original Screenplay*, pp. 65, 66, accessed August 7, 2013, available from <http://solomon.afso.alexanderstreet.com.qe2a-proxy.mun.ca/pdf/FS000632.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Hull and Viano, "The Image," p. 188-190.

⁵⁰ Scorsese, quoted in Richard Goldstein and Mark Jacobson, "Martin Scorsese Tells All: Blood and Guts Turn Me On!" in *Martin Scorsese: Interviews*, p. 62.

The demise of the Production Code Administration, and its subsequent replacement by the rating system, played a large part in Scorsese's ability to portray this type of realism. In the past, even when the documentary realists of the postwar period intended to create films which depicted life as it was, they were often unable to do so, largely due to PCA restrictions. The influence of HUAC also played a part in inhibiting the realism of certain films of the late 1940s and 1950s. This was especially true when filmmakers wanted to depict images or create dialogues which might be interpreted as socialist, as it was for Adrien Scott's *Cornered*.⁵¹

Scorsese and the other filmmakers who worked on *Mean Streets* did not have to contend with such restrictions. The film was financed by Bob Dylan's former tour manager Jonathan Taplin, who wanted to get out of the music business and into the movies. He travelled to Hollywood and was introduced to Scorsese, whose work he was not familiar with at that time. After meeting with Scorsese and viewing several of his student films, along with *Boxcar Bertha*, a low-budget movie Scorsese had made for Roger Corman, Taplin was intrigued. This is not surprising since Taplin was a fan of many of the same European directors who influenced Scorsese. After reading the script for *Mean Streets*, at the time under the title *Season of the Witch*, Taplin agreed to finance the picture as long as Scorsese could guarantee a distributor. Roger Corman agreed to distribute the film, even after Scorsese turned down his idea about making the picture into a blaxploitation flick. Taplin invested half of the money needed to make the film and was

⁵¹ For a more complete discussion on this matter, see Jennifer Langdon-Teclaw, "Negotiating the Studio System: Adrien Scott and the Politics of Anti-Fascism in *Cornered*," *Film Studies*, no. 7 (Winter, 2005), pp. 16-31.

able to acquire the other half from a friend. The film was originally budgeted at \$400,000, but eventually ran \$100,000 overbudget. In the end, however, Corman did not come through on his promise to distribute the film, causing Scorsese and Taplin to look elsewhere for a distributor.⁵² After being turned down by Peter Bart at Paramount, the film was eventually picked up for distribution by John Calley at Warner Brothers.⁵³

As discussed above, after being taken over by conglomerates, the heads of those corporations put new executives in place at the studios and gave them instructions to find out what audiences wanted to see. At Warner Brothers, this resulted in Ted Ashley being hired as studio head by Steven Ross, CEO of Kinney National Service. Ashley, a former agent, hired John Calley, a young producer who literally worked his way up from the mail room at NBC, to be head of production. Calley was among the new generation of Hollywood filmmakers who were cropping up at the time, having already produced a film which criticized the Vietnam War—albeit indirectly. He acknowledged that a new generation, in which he included himself, were being handed the reins by the new owners of the studios. “We were all young,” Calley says, and “it was our time and it was very exciting. The founders were no longer in charge. What had been this rigid, immobile structure had completely come apart and what was left was a lot of freedom.”⁵⁴ The man in charge of choosing the movies which would be distributed for Warners was, therefore,

⁵² “Jonathan Taplin Talks to Paul Rowlands about *Mean Streets*,” *Money into Light*, accessed August 9, 2013, available from <http://www.money-into-light.com/2012/07/jonathan-taplin-talks-to-paul-rowlands.html>.

⁵³ Biskind, *Easy Riders*, pp. 225, 226.

⁵⁴ Anthony Hayward, “Obituaries, John Calley: Film Producer who Made *Catch-22* and Successfully Headed Three Major Studios,” *The Independent*, October 5, 2011, accessed June 19, 2013, available from <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/john-calley-film-producer-who-made-catch22-and-successfully-headed-three-major-studios-2365494.html>.

like the new Hollywood directors who saw themselves as the successors to ageing filmmakers from the studio era. Like Evans and Bart at Paramount, Calley was willing to take chances, and he strongly believed in giving the director full control over his projects. Calley was into “making gut level bets on directors and writers.”⁵⁵ He took chances on a wide variety of films, and was responsible for mainstream hits like *The Towering Inferno* (1974) and *The Exorcist*, but also helped European filmmakers get a foothold in the United States.⁵⁶

When Calley and Leo Greenfield, Warners’ head of distribution, attended a screening of *Mean Streets*, Calley certainly seemed to be experiencing that “gut level feeling.” He was familiar with the New York locales and with the types of people depicted in the film. Scorsese recalls how much the two executives seemed to enjoy the screening, saying things to each other like “Hey, I remember that place,” and “I used to hang around with a guy just like that.” They even, at one point, shushed an usher who disrupted the film.⁵⁷ The realism of Scorsese’s film was intriguing to the executives, and the studio picked up the film for \$750,000.⁵⁸

If a studio invests heavily in the production of a movie, it has an incentive to make good on its investment through appropriate advertisements and theatre bookings. If, on the otherhand, a studio picks up an independent production, it has less incentive to do so. Indeed, the more the studio has invested into a film, the more it stands to lose.

⁵⁵ Brooks Barnes, “John Calley, Hollywood Chief Dies at 81,” *The New York Times*, September 14, 2012, accessed June 4, 2013, available from http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/14/business/media/john-calley-hollywood-chief-dies-at-81.html?_r=0.

⁵⁶ David Owen, “Return of the Mogul,” *The New Yorker*, March 21, 1994, p. 80.

⁵⁷ Biskind, *Easy Riders*, p. 226.

⁵⁸ Andrew J. Rausch, *The Films of Martin Scorsese and Robert De Niro* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2010), p. 11.

Independent pick-ups are, therefore, of lower priority than studio productions.⁵⁹ Since the studio paid so little for *Mean Streets*, it was less concerned with marketing that film than with the \$14 million dollar *The Exorcist*, which was to be released at around the same time. Warners basically brushed the low-budget gangster-noir aside in favour of its horror blockbuster.⁶⁰ In the words of Jonathan Taplin, as far as Warner Brothers was concerned, *Mean Streets* “was a nice, small art movie that won lots of awards and the other was a movie that was going to make \$100m. They were more excited by THE EXORCIST than in our film!”⁶¹

It was Calley’s willingness to take chances on films about which he had a good feeling that led to *Mean Streets* being picked up by Warners. If not for Calley’s unconventional way of choosing movies to produce and distribute, the film might never have been picked up by a major studio. And if it were not for the dire financial circumstances of Hollywood, which encouraged the owners of the conglomerates to hire the new generation of studio executives in an effort to find a solution to their financial problems, then *Mean Streets* might never have become a “Hollywood film.” In fact, Scorsese might never have found the modest financing he needed to make the film in the first place.

It was, therefore, the search for a new audience that led studio officials to take a chance on a new generation of filmmakers with a desire to make personal and realistic films which led to the production and distribution of *Mean Streets*. If the industry had

⁵⁹ David F. Prindle, *Risky Business: The Political Economy of Hollywood* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), p. 30.

⁶⁰ Rausch, *The Films of Martin Scorsese*, p. 12.

⁶¹ “Jonathan Taplin Talks.”

never experienced the financial problems of the 1950s and 1960s, directors like Scorsese might never have had an opportunity to work in Hollywood. Additionally, it was Scorsese's desire to portray his racist community in a realistic manner which led to the production and distribution of this noir which depicted race relations in a way that was entirely different from noirs of the classical period.

Chapter 4: Middle-Class Anxiety and *Taxi Driver* (1976)

Travis Bickle, the protagonist of *Taxi Driver*, was simultaneously captivating and repulsive. Played by Robert De Niro, Bickle is depicted as a lonely, bigoted introvert who takes a job as a taxi driver in New York City because he “can’t sleep nights.” Travis is bothered to the point of obsession with the “scum” who inhabit the city—that is, pimps, prostitutes, drug pushers, and other unsavoury people. His fixation with cleaning up this “filth” leads him to first try to assassinate a political candidate. When this fails he begins to obsess over “saving” a young prostitute, leading to a bloody climax in which he murders several people in a violent shootout.

Travis was the product of screenwriter Paul Schrader, a Hollywood Renaissance filmmaker who, like Martin Scorsese, was influenced by classical film noir. His films, therefore, were often similar to classical noirs in both narrative and aesthetic terms. However, as we will see, Schrader depicts racist working-class characters in his films for very different reasons than Scorsese. While Schrader was also interested in making personal movies steeped in realism, his films, unlike those of Scorsese, did not depict realistic situations but were reflective of his “real” state of mind. Schrader’s films reveal his actual thoughts and feelings, something he calls “psychological realism.”¹

Taxi Driver is an example of psychological realism. Its protagonist, in fact, acts as Schrader’s alter-ego, vocalizing and acting on his creator’s inner thoughts and desires, including his racist fantasies. In the 1970s, Schrader, like other middle-class white men of his generation, experienced anxiety brought about in part by an awareness of his racist

¹George Kouvaros, *Paul Schrader* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), p. 14.

tendencies, which were unacceptable in a liberal middle-class society. Schrader created Travis Bickle for two reasons. First, through Travis, Schrader was able to act out his socially unacceptable fantasies vicariously. Second, he was able to outwardly reject those very same fantasies, thus relieving the anxiety he felt about his own racism, by engaging in reaction formation.

Reaction formation is a psychological defence mechanism. It occurs when a person experiences thoughts or feelings which cause anxiety because they are socially unacceptable. In order to purge those negative thoughts and feelings, the individual will engage in behaviour or express feelings which are “directly contrary” to those which cause anxiety.² Put another way, the individual will “develop socially acceptable and, hence, personally tolerable goals, attitudes, and character traits that can be regarded as the antithesis of goals and attitudes that had been relegated to the unconscious through their ‘repression’.”³ For instance, as Dr. Neil Burton explains,

a man who finds himself attracted to someone of the same sex may cope with the unacceptability of this attraction by over-acting heterosexual: going out for several beers with the boys, speaking in a gruff voice, banging his fists on the counter, whistling at pretty girls (or whatever people do these days), conspicuously engaging in a string of baseless heterosexual relationships, and so on.⁴

Schrader’s screenplay for *Taxi Driver* worked in a similar way. Schrader experienced racist thoughts which made him uncomfortable because he knew that racism

² Irving Sarnoff, “Reaction Formation and Cynicism,” *Journal of Personality*, vol. 28, no. 1 (March, 1960), pp. 129-130.

³ Ralf-Peter Behrendt, *The Evolved Structure of Human Social Behaviour and Personality: Psychoanalytic Insights* (London: Karnac Books, 2012), p. 121.

⁴ Neil Burton, “Why People Are So Often the Opposite of What they Appear,” *Psychology Today*, accessed January 7, 2014, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/hide-and-peek/201203/why-people-are-so-often-the-opposite-what-they-appear>.

was unacceptable in middle-class circles. In his screenplay for *Taxi Driver* he created a racist character and portrayed him as a violent, juvenile and unintelligent man. Schrader then outwardly expressed his disdain for Travis and people like him. He admits that the way Travis acted was wrong and that he should be punished for his actions. Thus, by portraying Travis in this fashion and by overtly expressing his dislike for such people, Schrader tries to convince himself and others that he is not a bigot and that he is more sophisticated than people like Travis.

It is significant that Schrader chose to portray Travis as a working-class character. Since Travis is Schrader's attempt to convince himself and his middle-class peers that he is not a bigot, Schrader needed to portray his subject as someone from another social class, one in which it was not necessarily socially unacceptable to be racist. Thus, it made sense for him to portray Travis as a member of the working-class, whose members, like the subjects of LeMasters's study of blue-collar Americans or Scorsese's Italian-American community, outwardly expressed feelings of resentment towards African Americans. These people, as Schrader puts it, did not come from the same "intellectual tradition" as people of the middle-class, like himself.⁵

While he focuses more on depictions of masculinity, Derek Nystrom makes a similar argument in his monograph *Hard Hats, Rednecks, and Macho Men: Class in 1970s American Cinema*. Nystrom argues that depictions of working-class characters in films of the 1970s were "generated by a series of *middle-class* concerns and dilemmas... [T]he decade's cinematic renderings of white working-class masculinity tell us a great

⁵Richard Thompson, "Screenwriter Taxi Driver's Paul Schrader," *Film Comment* (March-April, 1976), p. 5.

deal about the crisis within [the white middle-class community].”⁶ These working-class characters were often threatening and repulsive. However, they were also often ones with which white middle-class men could identify. Working-class characters served “a sort of minstrel function, in which the pleasures that must be foregone in order to maintain one’s class identity are displaced and projected onto a denigrated other. “As with blackface minstrel,” he continues, “one cannot disregard the dominant function of this practice, which is to belittle and master the (here, class) other. Yet it would be equally misguided to ignore the class anxieties and antagonisms that generate the pleasure of these minstrel-like performances.”⁷ As we will see, Schrader comes close to admitting that he had racist thoughts but stops short of explicitly articulating those notions. Thus, by depicting racist characters like Travis, white middle-class male filmmakers, as well as white middle-class viewers, were able not only to purge themselves of their negative thoughts and feelings through reaction formation but also to act on those thoughts and feeling by living vicariously through those same characters.

The popularity of Archie Bunker of the 1970s television program *All in the Family* is a good example of this phenomenon. Social media often described Archie as a “lovable bigot,”⁸ a working-class New Yorker who was somehow racist, intolerant, rude, but also attractive to many people. Much of the show’s humour stemmed from disagreements

⁶ Nystrom, *Hard Hats*, p. 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁸ The term has become so associated with the character that when Carroll O’Connor, the actor who played Archie, died in 2001, many of his media obituaries mention that he played “TV’s lovable bigot” in the 1970s. See, for instance, David Zurawik, “O’Connor, Family’s Lovable Bigot, Dies at 76,” *The Baltimore Sun*, accessed December 12, 2014, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2001-06-22/features/0106220326_1_archie-bunker-carroll-oconnor-actor; “A Bigot who Taught Us Tolerance,” *Chicago Tribune*, accessed December 12, 2014, available from http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2001-06-23/news/0106230058_1_archie-bunker-carroll-o-connor-liberals.

between Archie and his liberal son-in-law Mike. It was the intention of the show's creator, Norman Lear, that Archie would demonstrate racism's ridiculousness. "Mike is always the one who is making sense," argues Lear. "Archie at best will work out some kind of convoluted logic to make a point. But it is always foolish. Totally foolish."⁹ Archie may have been foolish, but that did not stop him from being adored by millions of people. In fact, the show was the most popular American television program from 1971 through 1975.¹⁰

In 1974, psychoanalytical anthropologist Howard Stein examined the "paradox" which "underlies [Archie's] lovability." He argued that Archie "is lovable both because he embodies Everyman and because he can act out what Everyman can only think. To those for whom being a bigot is not right [i.e. the middle-class], Archie can be a bigot for them." He then goes on to say that "[f]or these viewers, Archie is 'me' and 'not me' simultaneously."¹¹ In the same fashion, Travis is both "me and not me" for Paul Schrader.

Despite Nystrom's comparison of the purpose served by blue-collar characters with a minstrel performance, he does not address depictions of racism in any depth, nor does he discuss film noir specifically. This chapter will expand upon his argument by using it to explain why one middle-class filmmaker created a working-class noir protagonist who was a bigot and thus different from the working-class noir protagonists of the classical period.

⁹Norman Lear, "As I Read How Laura Saw Archie...", *The New York Times*, October 10, 1971.

¹⁰TV Ratings: 1970-1971, accessed January 4, 2014, available from <http://www.classictvhits.com/tvratings/1970.htm>.

¹¹Howard Stein, "'All in The Family' As a Mirror of Contemporary American Culture," *Family Process*, vol. 13, no. 3 (1974), pp. 1, 14-15.

To depict someone as a bigot in the 1960s or 1970s was to insinuate that they were socially unsophisticated. Professor Lance Strate suggests that, unlike their children, adults who grew up during the Great Depression had a certain predisposition toward racism. This applied to both working and middle-class adults of the postwar period. Because these were years of great hardship, people tended to rely on those around them for support and formed tight bonds with other members of their immediate community, which often meant people of the same ethnic, religious, or racial groups as themselves. It also meant shunning group outsiders, which, according to Strate, "reinforced the human tendency toward bias and prejudice."¹² Furthermore, though government-endorsed racist policies were generally restricted to Southern states, such policies were not deemed illegal under the American Constitution until 1954. Racism was thus a part of state policy until several years after the war.

In the postwar period, however, political leaders and academics taught the middle-class that discrimination was wrong and that it is not acceptable in a liberal society. After the war, many scientists and intellectuals rejected the pseudo-scientific theories that encouraged racism.¹³ A panel of scientists funded by the United Nations declared that there was no scientific basis for the notion of racial superiority, and that "race was less a

¹² Lance Strate, quoted in Palash Ghosh, "Those were the Days: How Norman Lear and 'All in the Family' Permanently Change US Television and Society, *International Business Times*, accessed January 7, 2014, available from <http://www.ibtimes.com/those-were-days-how-norman-lear-all-family-permanently-changed-us-television-society-1270575>.

¹³ Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue that American intellectuals began to formulate theories which rejected the idea of race as biologically determined before the war. However, theories which regarded race as a social construct only gained a strong foothold throughout American society after the Second World War. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (London : Routledge, 1994) p. 16.

biological fact than a social myth."¹⁴ According to Michael Brown, educated people, through "exposure to middle-class institutions," learned not only that racism was socially unacceptable but also how to appear tolerant of racial minorities. These institutions, according to Brown, were ones to which the lower classes had no access.¹⁵

The middle class, however, was rarely directly affected by the same issues which drove the working class to displace its anger on others. Blue-collar men often worked hard at labouring jobs to provide for their families and still often struggled to get by while they watched others benefit from social assistance programs. As Hamill and LeMasters reveal, African Americans became one of the primary scapegoats for many frustrated working-class men who believed that blacks were unfairly receiving social assistance courtesy of the working-class white man's tax dollar. The white middle class, on the other hand, lived comfortable lives, worked at white-collar jobs, and, in the early 1970s had no reason to be frustrated with welfare recipients. In fact, they could lend their moral support to social assistance programs as a means of showing their compassion for the underprivileged and to avoid the stigma associated with racial intolerance. Furthermore, affirmative action programs were usually set up in blue-collar, not white-collar,

¹⁴Elazar Barkan, "The Politics of the Science of Race: Ashley Montagu and UNESCO's Anti-Racist Declarations," in *Race and Other Misadventures: Essays in Honor of Ashley Montagu in His Nineteenth Year*, ed. Larry T. Reynolds and Leonard Lieberman (Dix Hills, NJ: General Hall, 1996), p. 97.

¹⁵Michael K. Brown, *et al.*, *White-Washing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 41; Poul Duedahl notes that the conclusions reached by the UN scientists did not reach "the man in the streets," because the pamphlets which articulated the findings were hard to comprehend. "The reader," he states, "requires a high school degree to grasp the contents. Furthermore, there was much resistance to having these findings taught in US public schools, especially in the face of anti-communism. "UNESCO Man: Changing the Concept of Race, 1945-65," paper presented at the American Anthropological Association Meeting, November 12-23, 2008, San Francisco, California.

workplaces.¹⁶ All that white middle-class men needed to do to show their social sophistication was to pay lip service to racial tolerance without having to act on it.¹⁷ They could effectively discredit the lower classes as racists, in contrast to themselves, without appearing hypocritical.

In reality the middle class were not as tolerant as their rhetoric suggested. In fact, when their racism was challenged in practice, they behaved no differently than working-class whites. Brown argues that "[w]hen the demands of people of color hit closer to home and directly affect the middle-class, these traditionally color-blind Americans begin to sound distinctly less tolerant and become seriously concerned with the color of people's skin." He points out that when affirmative action programs were put in place in white-collar sectors, middle-class people were not supportive.¹⁸ It seems that the middle class was not very different in reality than the working class concerning racism in practice. However, middle class people were often able to appear tolerant and sophisticated due to their distance from racial minorities, making it possible for them to simply vocalize (i.e., lie about) just how tolerant they were. The very fact that middle-class people made an effort to appear tolerant, while in reality they were not, demonstrates that they were

¹⁶Government imposed affirmative action started in the blue-collar sector, most notably with the "landmark" Philadelphia Plan, issued by the Nixon Administration, which affected the construction industry. See Eric Arnesen, ed, *Encyclopedia of U.S. Labor and Working-Class History*, vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 19-22.

¹⁷Jennifer L. Pierce argues that there needs to be a "distinction between 'saying' and 'doing'" when conducting research on peoples' racist tendencies. She claims that "people may 'say' and not 'do' racism" and *vice versa*. Jennifer L. Pierce, "White Racism, Social Class, and the Backlash Against Affirmative Action," *Sociology Compass*, vol. 7, no. 11 (November, 2013), p. 923.

¹⁸Brown demonstrate that there is a discrepancy between what middle-class individuals are willing admit in surveys and how they behave in practice. While surveys often indicate that the middle class are less racist than the working class, when they are affected by preferential hiring and other such issues, they behave in the same way as blue-collar men. Brown, *et al.*, *White-Washing Race*, pp. 41-43.

indeed reluctant to appear racist to their peers due to the stigma associated with racism since the end of the Second World War.

Brown's observation that middle-class Americans were actually more racist in practice than their rhetoric suggested applies not only to the generation of middle-class adults who grew up during the Great Depression but also to their supposedly more liberal children. Evidence reveals that middle-class adults of the late 1970s and beyond behaved the same way as the generations that came before them.¹⁹ This was true even though, as Strate points out, the baby boomers, who were not exposed to the same hardships as their parents, seemed to "fully embrace the ideals of freedom and equality" in the 1960s.²⁰ Several scholars have formulated theories in an attempt to explain this, though there is no consensus on the exact reasons for this seeming anomaly.

Peter Marin, for instance, believes that young liberal baby boomers of the 1960s adopted conservative ideologies in the 1970s because of the "new narcissism" that emerged among that generation. Marin claims that due to several economic, political, and social factors, including inflation, widespread unemployment, the oil embargo by OPEC, and the Watergate scandal, a "collective paranoia" and anxiety developed in the minds of middle-class Americans. Furthermore, despite their many efforts to tackle social problems in the 1960s, boomers saw that inequalities and poverty not only continued to exist, but actually increased in the 1970s. Assessing their own economic position relative to that of

¹⁹Pierce points to a study which reveals that white professionals who claimed not to be racist also refused to "take proactive measures to bring an end to discrimination," thus engaging in institutional racism. Brown makes similar observations, arguing that middle-class people, while they might claim to be tolerant, act in a racist manner when racial politics affect their lives directly. See Pierce, "White Racism," p. 922, and Brown *et al.*, *White-Washing Race*, p. 42.

²⁰Ghosh, "Those Were the Days."

the poor, the middle class began to feel guilty for not being able to help the underprivileged and for living comfortable lives while others suffered. This guilt led many to adopt new views, some turning to therapy and spirituality which taught them that "privilege is earned or deserved," and that each person is "responsible for [their] own fate." This, according to Marin, was simply a way of "protecting... the self," allowing them to continue living their privileged lives without feeling guilty, and led to "a retreat from the worlds of morality and history, an unembarrassed denial of human reciprocity and community."²¹ Included in this new philosophy was a negative view of programs such as affirmative action, which were put in place to help minority groups.²²

Marin's ideas are intriguing. However, he does not prove convincingly that this "new narcissism" was prevalent among white middle-class Americans. His evidence derives mainly from personal encounters with people who had adopted such philosophies. He fails to provide convincing evidence that these individuals adopted such ideas as a way of protecting themselves against feelings of guilt. To gather such information would in fact be very difficult, as people would likely be reluctant to admit such feeling to others. Furthermore, they may have experienced those feelings subconsciously. So even if Marin

²¹Peter Marin, "The New Narcissism," *Harper's*, October 1, 1975, pp. 46-49; Like Marin, others have argued that in the 1970s there was a backlash against social programs and liberalism in general. Brown, for instance, argues that "[s]ince the 1970s, the public has often believed that social programs do not work, that we tried more generous measures of this kind and they failed massively. That belief," he continues, "in turn, justifies doing nothing at all or relying on the kinds of private or market solutions to social problems championed by racial conservatives." Still other scholars, like Phillip Jenkins and Barbara Ehrenreich, believe that permissiveness, or a lack of discipline by the government and at home, was the cause of America's economic and social downfall in the 1970s, leading them to adopt conservative ideologies. See Brown, *et. al.*, *White-Washing Race*, p. 247, Phillip Jenkins, *A Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989).

²²Historians writing about conservative backlash after the release of Martin's article tended to focus on the working-class. Pierce, however, argues that the middle-class "played a significant, though less overt, role in reproducing White racism than do [sic] the working class Americans," and that recent scholarship is beginning to acknowledge that fact. Pierce, "White Racism," p. 922.

is correct, evidence confirming his theory might simply be unavailable. Nevertheless, it remains likely that at least some white middle-class Americans did experience a shift toward narcissism and away from liberal ideologies in the way that Marin suggests.²³

Some scholars have advanced different ideas to explain why the white middle class of the 1970s appear more conservative than in the 1960s. James A. Hijaya, for instance, does not believe that there was a shift in ideology among boomers at all. Instead, he claims that liberal baby boomers of the 1960s willingly changed their social status. Hijaya notes that there had been many conservative middle-class youth in the 1960s just as there had been liberals. He argues that the 1960s should not be remembered as “a decade of the left, but as one of polarization between left and right.”²⁴ By the 1970s, many middle-class youth of the left chose to join the blue-collar workforce, while those of the right chose white-collar jobs.²⁵ Because young liberals of this generation were downwardly mobile, by the 1970s young middle-class adults would have been proportionately more conservative than the middle-class youth of the 1960s. Thus, the shift from predominantly liberal to conservative ideologies among this generation may have been less striking than Marin suggests. It was likely a combination of these two phenomena which account for the greater visibility of middle-class conservatives in the 1970s. Whatever the case, two

²³ It should be acknowledged that Marin’s article was published in a popular magazine (though one intended for an educated middle-class readership), and not in a scholarly journal. Marin writes with emotion and his arguments are less thoroughly researched than those of scholarly articles. This, however, does not mean that his argument should not be taken seriously. Indeed, his general premise was taken up by serious scholars, though subsequent studies focusing on the “new narcissism” of the 1970s seem to have deviated from Marin’s original idea that Americans adopted this narcissism due to feelings of guilt over failed social agendas of the 1960s. See Imogen Tyler, “From the Me Decade to the Me Millennium: The Cultural History of Narcissism,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3 (September, 2007): pp. 343-363.

²⁴ Hijaya argues that the history of conservative middle-class youth of the 1960s may have been ignored by historians of the past because their history was “not as interesting” as that of the New Left. James A. Hijaya, “The Conservative 1960s,” *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2 (August, 2003), pp. 202, 213.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

things are certain: first, many of the white middle-class of Paul Schrader's generation were racists, or supported racist policies; and second, there was a negative stigma attached to racial intolerance in white middle-class society at that time. Racist middle-class boomers were therefore, like Schrader, reluctant to express their racism outwardly.

Some conservative middle-class whites in the 1970s were able to argue that they were not racist, even while supporting racist policies. They did so by championing the notion of "color-blindness." Color-blindness is an ideology where "no special significance, rights, or privileges [are] attached to one's 'race'." This concept, according to Omi and Winant, "[t]aken at face value" would seem to "affirm the values of 'fair play' and 'equal opportunity'." These were ideals which, one could argue, "constitute the very essence of [the American] democratic way of life."²⁶ According to Ashley Doane, supporting such an ideology allowed people "to oppose racial equality without appearing to be racist—or at least being able to maintain a façade of plausible deniability."²⁷ Thus, racist people found a way to support racist policies and to deny their own racism at the same time. Similarly, like racists who adopted the "color-blind" ideology, Schrader, in his screenplay for *Taxi Driver*, was able to act on his own racism while appearing to be tolerant by vocalizing his distaste for people like Travis Bickle.

Taxi Driver was chosen for distribution by a major Hollywood studio because of the persistence of the filmmakers involved, who were able to convince a major studio executive that this was a project worth investing in. David Begelman, head of Columbia,

²⁶ Omi and Winant, *Reaction Formation*, p. 1.

²⁷ Ashley Doane, "The Changing Politics of Color-Blind Racism," in *Research in Race and Ethnic Relations*, vol. 14, eds. Rodney D. Coats and Rutledge M. Dennis (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Ltd, 2007), p. 162.

was not intrigued by the film's premise, but he realized that he risked little by paying so little for "names" which would be attached to the film. In the early 1970s, when Martin Scorsese first agreed to direct the picture, and Robert De Niro was set to star, there was little interest from the major studios, as the film was not considered commercial. Indeed, by the mid-1970s, the way studio executives were choosing which films to finance or distribute was again changing. After the success of several high-budget genre films, notably *The Godfather* (1972), *The Exorcist*, and especially *Jaws* (1975), studio executives were becoming less interested in "American New Wave" films like *Easy Rider* and *Mean Streets*.²⁸ However, after De Niro won his first Academy Award, Scorsese had directed his first successful studio film, and the two producers who were attached to the film had won Academy Awards for producing *The Sting* (1973), the *Taxi Driver* package seemed more appealing, especially since De Niro, Scorsese, and Schrader all agreed to take significant cuts in pay in order to get the film made. This deal was too good to turn down, so Begelman agreed to finance the picture for a modest \$1.3 million.²⁹

Like *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver* was directed by Martin Scorsese, who employed many of the same classical noir-inspired aesthetic techniques in this film as he did in his earlier work. Its story, too, is similar to *Mean Streets* insofar as it is about a troubled, working-class protagonist involved in criminal activity. Travis's mental condition verges on psychotic. He obsesses over the moral degradation of his city. He believes the city has become "like an open sewer" and that someone needs to clean it up. Travis knows that he

²⁸Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath, and Noel King, eds, *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), p. 43.

²⁹Thompson, "Screenwriter," p. 11; Steven Prigge, *Movie Moguls Speak: Interviews with Top Film Producers* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2004), p. 108.

wants to do something to get the “scum” off the streets, but for much of the film he is unsure of what to do. He tells a friend that he “has some bad ideas” in his head. Travis obviously has thoughts of acting out violently to “fix” the problem he perceives, but at first is unsure if acting violently is the correct course of action to take. Eventually, however, Travis gives into his violent urges and attempts to assassinate a political candidate. When that attempt fails, he goes after the pimps who have, in his mind, been holding a young prostitute captive.

As with *Mean Street*, Scorsese makes use of many classical noir techniques. For instance, he uses low-key lighting throughout and many scenes are shot night-for-night. These techniques, as previously stated, often imply a troubled protagonist threatened by prevailing darkness. Scorsese uses many angles and framing techniques common to film noir which “creates a sense of unease.”³⁰ One such technique he uses is the choker-shot, or extreme close up. Travis’s eyes peering at the “scum” on the streets often take up the entire frame, as the audience is forced to watch Travis watching the city. Such shots are “obtrusive and disturbing.”³¹ The mood created by these shots is reflective of Travis’s psychological state.

Bodnar attributes much of the thematic content of the film to Martin Scorsese, who was “imprinted with many of the fault-finding impulses of the counterculture.” Scorsese, according to Bodnar, “moved easily toward a critique of established politics and institutions in America and concluded that without authorities and institutions that could

³⁰David C. Simmons, “The Dysphoric Style in Contemporary American Cinema” (Doctoral Dissertation, Florida State University, 2005), p. 103.

³¹ Place and Peterson, “Some Visual Motifs,” p. 26.

be trusted, futures were problematic and widespread cynicism was inevitable.”³² Scorsese was indeed one of the primary creative minds behind the film, especially in the area of aesthetics, but it was not Scorsese who conceived of the story. *Taxi Driver* was the product of its screenwriter, Paul Schrader. Scorsese has admitted that “*Taxi Driver* is really Paul Schrader’s... we merely interpreted it, and the original concept is all his.”³³ Schrader also admits that there were “very few” changes made between his draft script and the final product.³⁴ “[E]verything I intended is on the screen,” says Schrader, “for better or worse.”³⁵

Schrader, like Scorsese, was influenced by classical film noir. He even wrote a popular article outlining classical noir’s main features.³⁶ The protagonists in Schrader’s films are often similar to those of classical noir. They are usually psychologically troubled urban dwellers, involved in some kind of criminal activity, as they are in two films which he wrote and directed, *American Gigolo* (1980) and *Light Sleeper* (1992). Schrader even directed a remake of one very popular classical film noir, *Cat People* (1982). Thus, like *Mean Streets*, *Taxi Driver* resembles classical film noir because it was made by Hollywood Renaissance filmmakers whose works were influenced by noirs of the 1940s and 1950s, but differs from classical film noir insofar as its protagonist is depicted as a racist.

³² Bodnar, *Blue-Collar Hollywood*, p. 187.

³³ Scorsese quoted in Anthony Decurtis, “What the Streets Mean,” in *Martin Scorsese: Interviews*, p. 182.

³⁴ Paul Schrader, *Schrader on Schrader and Other Writings*, ed. Kevin Jackson (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 116.

³⁵ Thompson, “Screenwriter,” p. 14.

³⁶ See Schrader, “Notes on Film Noir.”

George Kouvaros states that Schrader uses film as “a vehicle for ideas.” Schrader admits that the taxi driver was a representation of his own feelings of loneliness and alienation from society during a difficult time in his life. He describes his films as “psychological realism.” His characters reveal something about his own psyche.³⁷ He also claims that *Taxi Driver* “is a very rich piece of juvenilia” and that its protagonist represents “an adolescent, immature mind struggling to identify itself.” Travis, therefore, represented of the less mature part of his psyche.

Schrader even claims that he underwent psychoanalysis and discovered that he had been able to avoid letting his pain and anxiety rule his life by keeping it within his work. The creation of this character was his way of dealing with his violent impulses. “At the time I wrote [the script],” Schrader admits, “I was very enamoured of guns, I was very suicidal, I was drinking heavily, I was obsessed with pornography in the way a lonely person is, and all those elements are upfront in the script.”³⁸ When asked by an interviewer what led him to write such violence into his scripts, Schrader responds by saying that it is just a means of “getting something out of my system,” and that he “had emotional needs that demanded to be fantasized. They needed characters. They had to come alive.” He says that he has a history of acting violently, but to stop himself from doing so he began performing those violent acts “vicariously in film.” In other words, *Taxi Driver* was a way for him to express his inner, socially inappropriate feelings by ascribing them to a more “juvenile” working-class avatar. Travis was an outlet, an expression of his “immature mind.” Schrader admits that Travis Bickle “is me without

³⁷ Kouvaros, *Paul Schrader*, pp. 13-14.

³⁸ Schrader, *Schrader on Schrader*, p. 117.

any brains.”³⁹ Thus, as Nystrom suggests, Schrader created Travis because he wanted to act out his fantasies vicariously through a fictional character.

Travis also represents a more existential dilemma which had bothered Schrader since his youth. Schrader claims that he used to question the worth of his own existence. He pondered such things as, if Jesus were to return tomorrow, would he be saved or have to suffer for his sins. He believes that if a man decides that he is not worthy of his own existence—that is, if he decides that it is time to die—then he should kill himself. He claims that Travis, troubled by his loneliness and questions of self-worth, wrongly directs his frustrations at others instead of at himself. Schrader believes that many Americans are like Travis, and he attributes this to the

immaturity and youngness[sic] of our country. We don't properly understand the nature of this problem, so the self-destructive impulse, instead of being inner-directed, as it is in Japan, Europe, and other older countries, becomes outer directed. The man who feels the time has come to die will go out and kill other people rather than kill himself..... There is not enough intellectual tradition in this country, and not enough history; and Travis is just not smart enough to understand his problem.

But what exactly does Schrader mean when he says that “we don’t properly understand the nature of this problem?” Certainly Schrader does not include himself in this category, despite the use the term “we,” as he admits that he, unlike those people, does understand the problem and is able to determine the proper solution. Travis, on the other hand, is too unintelligent to do so. Travis is not a part of the same “intellectual tradition” as Schrader and other members of the middle class. He is depicted as a blue-collar everyman whose

³⁹ Thompson, "Screenwriter," pp. 9, 14, 18; Glenn Rechler, "Patty Hearst: An Interview with Paul Schrader," *Cineaste*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1989): p. 31.

immaturity leads him to misdirect his anger and frustration. Indeed, Schrader claims that “[t]he redemption or elevation of transcendence” which Travis is looking for, “is that of an adolescent—He's simply striking out. He is not intelligent enough to give it any real meaning.” The workingclass, therefore, is the “we” that Schrader refers to, and he speaks about them in a belittling way.⁴⁰

Schrader has not given Travis the same restraint as he claims those with more intelligence would have had. He has made Travis not only violent, but also unintelligent and racist. Indeed, he admits not only that Travis has “no brains” but also that “[t]here's no doubt that Travis is a racist. He's full of anger and he directs his anger at people just a little lower than him on the totem pole.”⁴¹ Travis's racism is on display throughout the film. For instance, in his use of derogatory terms like spook, or his hateful glances at black pimps in a dinner, at black pedestrians in the streets, and at a young black man dancing with a white woman on television. Travis even aims his .44 magnum at the image of this young man on TV. Travis also kills a black man who is robbing a convenience store.⁴² These are examples of a working-class character acting out his middle-class creator's violent racist fantasies.

Jonathan Rosenbaum claims that the film is “a violently Calvinist, racist, sexist, and apocalyptic wish-fulfilment fantasy, complete with an extended bloodbath.” Although

⁴⁰Thompson, “Screenwriter,” pp. 9-11.

⁴¹Taubin, *Taxi Driver*, p. 22.

⁴²While it is true that Travis kills many white men as well in the final shootout, it should be noted that Schrader had originally intended all of those men to be African Americans. The racism had to be toned down because the producers feared that the racism might be too intense. In Schrader's own words: “in the script that I sold, at the end all the people he kills are black. Marty and the Phillipses [the producers] and everyone said, no, we just can't do this, it's an incitement to riot; but it was the true nature of the character.” See Jonathan Rosenbaum, “New Hollywood and the Sixties Melting Pot,” *The Last Great American Picture Show*, eds. Thomas Elsaesser, et. al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), p. 151.

Travis is certainly depicted as a racist, Schrader had actually intended for Travis to be more obviously racist than he appears in the film.⁴³ Schrader all but admits to having had racist thoughts and feelings himself. Writing the script for *Taxi Driver* served as a way for him to exorcise those feelings along with his thoughts about violence. When questioned about this racism, Schrader answers by saying “that’s really what art is about. I think one is stung into progressive, positive behaviour by an awareness of the great lure of negative thought; it’s the awareness of prejudice inside you that spurs you on to rid yourself and others of it.”⁴⁴

Travis, however, does not realize he is acting wrongly. He is amoral, as opposed to immoral. He thinks he is doing right, in fact. His middle-class creator, on the other hand, knows the difference. Schrader, unlike Travis, was exposed to those "middle-class institutions" which Brown refers to and was taught that racism was not acceptable. Furthermore, Schrader admits that because he comes from a Calvinist background, he feels that he will be judged for each and every action he makes. Since he knows right from wrong for him “all acts are moral acts, all acts have consequences.”⁴⁵ So, for a middle-class person to act as Travis did would be immoral. Travis is saved, perhaps, from becoming a real villain in that he believes he is doing something for the good of society. His is a warped view of right and wrong. Scorsese recognizes this, stating that Travis “is convinced that he is doing the right thing, that he's on the good side.”⁴⁶ Yet, he is still depicted as socially unsophisticated, ignorant, and unintelligent, in contrast to Schrader,

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Schrader, *Schrader on Schrader*, p. 117.

⁴⁵ Kelly, *Scorsese*, p. 90.

⁴⁶ Scorsese, *Scorsese on Scorsese*, p 54.

who, like other middle-class men from the same "intellectual tradition," admits to being socially conscious, enlightened, and educated.

A good example of this contrast in the film itself can be found in the scene in which Travis picks up a fare from a young man, played by Scorsese, who asks Travis to park his cab outside of an apartment building. The man reveals to Travis that his wife, whose silhouette can be seen from their vantage point, is inside having an affair with a black man, whom he refers to a "nigger," and claims that he will murder his wife with a .44 magnum revolver. It is revealing that Scorsese decided to play the character himself. The man in the back seat was intended to be of the middle class, as revealed both by Schrader's description of him in the script and by Scorsese's actual portrayal. Schrader describes him as a young man wearing a leather sports jacket, certainly a more fitting wardrobe choice for a young middle-class man, in contrast to Travis's plaid shirt, blue jeans, and Vietnam army jacket.⁴⁷ Scorsese, in his portrayal of the man, makes this class distinction even more obvious, as he is well groomed and wears, in addition to the sports jacket, a shirt and tie. Interestingly, the man chooses to confide in a working-class individual when discussing his violent, racist, fantasies. Schrader says that this man was just blowing off steam and never would have actually killed his wife. "The idea of the scene," Schrader explains, "is that the man in the back seat would never kill anybody, but the man in the front seat would.... The man in the back seat gets his energy off; [Travis] never does."⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Excerpts from Schrader's script which give this description are cited in Thompson, "Screenwriter," p. 12.

⁴⁸ Thompson, "Screenwriter," p. 13.

While Schrader never says outright that he had racist thoughts, he comes very close to doing so. Indeed, he admits to having had "dark," "negative," and "evil" thoughts. Schrader was aware that it would have been unacceptable to act on his negative thoughts, so he created Travis as a means of "blowing those evil thoughts out of my head." Thus, Schrader made Travis a working-class character because a middle-class man, in his view, would have been educated enough to know the inappropriateness of acting on such thoughts. Working-class men like Travis, as depicted by Schrader, are unintelligent, uneducated and socially "juvenile." Travis, therefore, is the perfect candidate to serve as Schrader's alter-ego, or "reactionary id."⁴⁹ Through Travis, Schrader is able to experience acting in a socially unacceptable way. At the same time, he is able to deny the validity of those actions and ridicule those who would act this way in reality. Schrader thus engages in reaction formation.

Nystrom suggests that working-class characters in films of the 1970s could also function for spectators in the same way as they did for their creators. Therefore, while *Taxi Driver* was, for Schrader, "an intensely personal piece of work,"⁵⁰ other white middle-class men, notably the film's director, Martin Scorsese, also felt that Travis served a similar purpose for them. It should be reiterated that Travis was the creation of Paul Schrader almost exclusively. Scorsese even admits that he did not alter Schrader's script, that he simply "communicate[d] in images what [Schrader] expressed in words." Since Scorsese was not the primary author of the story, and

⁴⁹Nystrom uses this term in reference to another working-class film character of the 1970s. See Nystrom, *Hard Hats*, p. 32.

⁵⁰Scorsese, *Scorsese on Scorsese*, p. 51.

because he has revealed in interviews his own interpretation of it, it would be useful to examine Scorsese's views as one example of another white middle-class man's interpretation of the story to demonstrate that others were able to use Travis to relieve their own anxieties.

Scorsese did not come from a middle-class background, but by the time he was involved with *Taxi Driver* he was firmly within the middle class. Scorsese attended New York University, earning both an English degree and a fine arts degree in film. After graduating he moved to California, where he started out by editing various films and directing an exploitation flick for Roger Corman, before building a reputation in Hollywood. Scorsese claims that he was “attracted to the extreme characters and situations” in the script.⁵¹ “All I can say is I identified with the Travis Bickle character—of being the outsider, sort of the dispossessed.”⁵² In this way Scorsese, while not having had the very same personal experiences as Schrader, still felt the same middle-class anxieties. “I know this guy, Travis,” Scorsese admits, “I’ve had the feelings he has, and those feelings have to be explored, taken out and examined.”⁵³ Scorsese also claims that he saw “the danger... of Travis's character, where he feels one way, and then fantasizes, but then acts out the fantasy, in violence, which is obviously wrong. I felt I totally understood him and totally felt the same way.”⁵⁴ So Scorsese, while not the creator of the character or the story, felt a vicarious connection with Travis, and, like Schrader, also felt as if Travis lacked the same

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *A Decade Under the Influence.*

⁵³ Scorsese, quoted in Guy Flatley, “Martin Scorsese’s Gamble,” in *Martin Scorsese: Interviews*, p. 56.

⁵⁴ *A Decade Under the Influence.*

middle-class sophistication possessed by himself, leading him to act on his negative thoughts.

Assessing the entire white middle-class audience reaction to *Taxi Driver* would not be possible. However, Nystrom suggests that an examination of film critics' commentary on films can help us attain "a suggestive sampling of the class assumptions that [white middle-class] spectators brought to these films and, in turn, show us how an implicitly middle-class identity in the 1970s were made to function for the [white middle-class] audience." Furthermore, he points out that we can, by considering film reviews and reading the film text, "create an informed profile of how these films were mobilized by and for their [white middle-class] audiences to shape and articulate their sense of class identity."⁵⁵

A.D. Murphy, film critic for *Variety*, describes Travis as a man who has "been (like most of us), deceived by false advertising, phony movies and TV dramaturgy, vote-hungry politicians, simplistic and plat morality." But even if Murphy admits to feeling the same frustrations as Travis, he describes the cabbie's actions at the end of the film as "brutal" and "horrendous."⁵⁶ Patricia Paterson and Manny Farber observe that *Taxi Driver* depicts the "lower class" as "animals feeding on each other." They also note that Travis is "a psychotic, racist nobody," but go on to say to describe him as a "handsome hackie"

⁵⁵Nystrom, *Hard Hats*, pp. 16-17; Other media scholars have made this argument as well. S. Crofts, for instance, suggests that film reviews "have value as indicating broader community responses to film." This, he argues, is true because "reviewers are opinion leaders and responsible to the commonality of their readerships, conceived as broad market sectors with certain reading competencies and forms of cultural capital." "[R]eviews," he continues, "give indicative—not definitive—pointers to prevailing discursive assumptions among the communities of those who write and read film reviews." S. Crofts, "Foreign Tunes? Gender and Nationality in Four Countries' Reception of *The Piano*," in *Jane Campion's The Piano*, ed. Harriet Margolis, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 154.

⁵⁶A.D. Murphy, "Review: *Taxi Driver*," *Variety*, February 3, 1976.

who is "set up as lean and independent, an appealing innocent." Similarly, Vincent Canby describes Travis as "psychotic" and "nutty," but also "fascinating," "a riveting character" who "is a projection of all of our nightmares of urban alienation."⁵⁷ All of these reviews reveal the same attraction/revulsion duality discussed above. It is safe to assume, therefore, that Travis served the same purpose for other white middle-class spectators as he did for Schrader.

Taxi Driver is more than just a simple escapist fantasy, especially for its creators and for many white middle-class spectators. It is a neo-noir which served a special purpose. Travis was the "reactionary id" for Schrader, Scorsese and for middle-class spectators alike. He was their blue-collar avatar, who provided an outlet for their middle-class anxieties and repressed racism at a time in which explicit racism was taboo for middle-class whites. Through Travis, they were able to live out their own racist fantasies vicariously. At the same time they outwardly rejected racism by discrediting the blue-collar character who engaged in it, thus engaging in reaction formation.

⁵⁷Vincent Canby, "Taxi Driver," *The New York Times*, February 8, 1976.

Conclusion

This thesis focuses specifically on changing race relations in two cycles of films of the melodrama genre. Melodramas, what today might be called action films or thrillers, were movies which featured action sequences, mystery, gunfights, and adventure. During the 1940s the melodrama genre began to exhibit various narrative and aesthetic features which distinguished it from earlier melodramas. Unlike earlier films, these melodramas, or films noir, usually featured a psychologically troubled working-class protagonist. The protagonist was typically either a detective or a criminal, who resided in claustrophobic urban environments, and shunned domesticity. Noir filmmakers often used distinguishable aesthetic techniques to create a mood of despair and to emphasize the psychological state of the protagonist. One notable feature of classical film noir is the sympathy their protagonists exhibit toward African Americans. This cycle of films ended in the 1950s and re-emerged in the 1970s. Neo-noirs from the 1970s were distinguishable from classical noirs in that they featured racial antagonism between their white working-class and African-American characters.

Classical film noir was infused with the ideologies of leftist filmmakers who were drawn to the crime drama in the postwar period. These filmmakers were often liberals, socialists, or even communists and members of the Popular Front. In the postwar period they found themselves allied with the Hollywood proletariat in a struggle against studio management and anti-communist elements in the federal government. Furthermore, the political worldview of the Popular Front was marked by both racial tolerance and

sympathy for labourers, two concepts which fused in film noir to create images of working-class protagonists who were friendly with racial minorities.

In the postwar period Hollywood experienced a financial downturn brought about by changes in American demographics, a rise in the popularity of television, and changing leisure activities. Additionally, this same period brought about changes in the nature of the industry in terms of the filmmaking process and more lax standards in regards sex, violence and foul language. There was also a changing of the guard at the studios. The film moguls were replaced by heads of the multi-national conglomerates that had taken over the studios. Those conglomerate heads began hiring new, younger studio executives, who in turn hired a new generation of filmmakers to make films to attract a new audience. The films of the 1970s, made by this new generation of filmmakers, were often similar in style and narrative to film noir of the 1940s and 1950s. These new filmmakers, however, did not hold the same political views as those of the classical period, and race relations in neo-noir were often contentious. There are three specific reasons for this change.

In blaxploitation neo-noirs, the whole notion of the white working-class protagonist was changed and updated to satisfy the desire among young urban blacks for strong, militant black heroes. By the early 1970s many young African Americans were tired of seeing unrealistic portrayals of black people in Hollywood films. Hollywood executives eventually realized the financial potential of films targeting young African Americans, leading them to produce low-budget movies featuring assertive, black protagonists who overcame prejudices and hardships imposed on them by white America, often through violence. The antagonism in these films was usually presented directly

through interactions between the black lead and racist white cops. Such was the case in *Superfly* and *The Mack*.

Other filmmakers of the 1970s were interested in portraying realistic characters and situations. The new generation of directors and writers hired in the early 1970s were graduates of film schools where they drew inspiration from classical Hollywood films, including film noir. They were also influenced by European filmmakers, who developed new filmmaking techniques and engaged in realistic filmmaking. Martin Scorsese was among this new generation of Hollywood filmmakers. Scorsese's penchant for realism led him to depict the racism of the working-class Italian-American community of New York's Little Italy in his films, which often resembled classical film noir. *Mean Streets* serves as one example of a New Hollywood noir featuring racist working-class characters.

Other filmmakers used film as a means to relieve their anxieties and play out their repressed racist fantasies through working-class others. Paul Schrader, like other middle-class Americans in the 1970s, experienced racist thoughts which were socially unacceptable in middle-class circles by that time. Some people sought ways to deny their own racism while still acting in a racist manner. Such was the case with white middle-class Americans who adopted "colour-blindness" as a philosophy. Schrader did so by creating Travis Bickle. Through this unsophisticated, violent, and racist character, Schrader was able to play out his socially inappropriate racist fantasies and also to discrediting people who were explicitly racist. In this way Schrader engaged in reaction formation.

The 1970s were a special moment in Hollywood history. The panic brought on by the collapse of the studio system led to a unique situation in which the major studios, for

the first time, were willing to take chances, to experiment with film narratives and styles, and to hire new, untested filmmakers who would serve as the creative minds behind these experiments. Blaxploitation films, personal cinema, and unconventional films, like the ones discussed in these chapters, were the result. But the Hollywood Renaissance would come to an end before long.

After *Jaws*(1975) revealed the advantages of mass marketing techniques aimed at a mass audience, industry bosses increasingly focused on making films which, like the films of the classical era, appealed to an undifferentiated audience. These new films were fuelled by advertising and were released in many theatres at one time, rather than being rolled out gradually as they were in the past. They were largely plot based, not character driven, like Hollywood Renaissance films. As Peter Bogdanovich points out, many New Hollywood directors, by the middle of the decade, had been making films which lost a lot of money. According to Bogdanovich, “[w]e all made a picture or two which were more expensive than they should have been, and they didn’t work, and people said ‘well maybe they don’t know’[the formula for making money in Hollywood].” Francis Ford Coppola explains that by the end of the 1970s, many executives were complaining “about how the film director had too much freedom, had too much power,” and that it was time that those directors were “put in their place.” The studios, according to Paul Schrader, “very quickly learned that the way not to be at the mercy of filmmakers is to do your own demographics, you show them studies and figure out what the audience wants.”¹ As David Cook puts it,

¹*A Decade Under the Influence.*

“[i]n post-JAWS America, the sixties were as dead as Huey Newton, and the ‘Hollywood Renaissance’ was about to bottom out.”²

Neo-noirs continued to be influential after the 1970s, as studios invested heavily in noir blockbusters and picked up independent noirs for distribution. Just as the cine-literate Hollywood Renaissance directors consciously made films in the mode of classical film noir, many directors since the 1970s have consciously moulded their films to resemble those of the past. Robert Kolker argues that some of these new films noir—those of Quentin Tarantino for instance—are simple pastiche, or a "sampling," of films from generations past. He notes that Tarantino is especially influenced by two films noir, one from the classical period, *The Killing* (1956), and one neo-noir, *Mean Streets*. But Kolker also argues that unlike Hollywood Renaissance directors, "postmodern" directors like Tarantino actually avoid making films that are complex or meaningful, and that their products are banal in comparison.

If Kolker is correct, if these newer films are simply composites of older films, then perhaps “postmodern” films noir cannot tell us as much about contemporary social phenomena like race and class relations as their predecessors. Tarantino's films did contain racist dialogue, but Kolker argues that even if that racism "threatens to break out into a quite nasty view of the world... this nastiness keeps being laughed off-by the mock intensity of the action, the prowling, confronting, perverse, confined and airless meanness of the world Tarantino creates.”³ This thesis does not claim to agree or disagree with Kolker’s conclusions. However, if he is correct, this new approach to racial themes

²Cook, *Lost Illusions*, p. 7.

³Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 264.

demonstrates that changes continue to take place in the industry. Determining what lead to such changes would be beyond the scope of this thesis, though Hollywood's treatment of issues concerning race and class in film noir in the decades since the 1970s is an interesting subject worthy of further consideration.

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