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“Black is In”

Race and Genre in Early 1990s American Cinema

In January 1990, three films by black directors won top prizes at the US Film Festival (which the following year was renamed the Sundance Film Festival): Wendell Harris' true-life drama *CHAMELEON STREET* (1989), Charles Burnett's family drama *TO SLEEP WITH ANGER*, and the Hudlin brothers' hip hop comedy *HOUSE PARTY*. In the wake of this surprise success, considerable press attention was given to the American film industry's recent willingness to employ black filmmakers. In March that year, the *New York Daily News* reported that “black film directors are making serious inroads in Hollywood's long-established lily-white order,” because the film industry realized “that there's money to be made and critical praise to be earned with the richly varied visions of black film makers.”¹⁾ The article noted that “while the black population makes up only 13 % of the moviegoing public, 30 % are frequent moviegoers”, a much higher percentage than for the white population. It also noted that the American film industry had made several previous attempts specifically to service the black cinema audience (notably in the 1970s with “blaxploitation” films such as *SHAFT* and *SUPER FLY* /both 1971/).

Also in March 1990, a *New York Times* headline announced: “In Hollywood, black is in.”²⁾ The writer of this article was in no doubt that the main reason for African American directors “being welcomed as never before by studios” was “their moneymaking potential.”³⁾ While their primary audience could be found among the black minority, “industry marketing mavens long resistant to the idea are beginning to recognize that a white audience will spend money to see black movies.”⁴⁾ An indication of this development was pro-

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- 1) Martha Southgate, ‘Doing the Spike thing: a new generation of black filmmakers is bringing a new attitude to Hollywood’, *New York Daily News*, 11 March 1990, City Lights Section, pp. 3, 5.
- 2) James Greenberg, ‘In Hollywood, black is in’, *New York Times*, 4 March 1990, Section 2, pp. 1, 22–3.
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 4) *Ibid.*

vided by "the unprecedented success of Eddie Murphy", who had long since crossed over into the Hollywood mainstream, and by "more recently the trend-setting popularity of Arsenio Hall" on television: "But more directly responsible was Spike Lee's left field hit *SHE'S GOTTA HAVE IT* in 1986, which opened the eyes of the industry to the potential of black films".⁵⁾ Also referenced in this article is the box office success of Steven Spielberg's 1985 adaptation of Alice Walker's Pulitzer prize-winning novel *THE COLOR PURPLE*. Finally, the writer points out that, in addition to the commercial potential of black-helmed films ("helmer" being an industry term for director),⁶⁾ the employment of African American filmmakers made the film industry look good — that is these filmmakers made it appear less biased and more diverse racially. It was excellent publicity for an industry that had been criticized heavily for its exclusion of blacks. However, the article also raised the possibility that investments in black-helmed films might only be a temporary fad. Spike Lee was quoted as saying: "Black filmmakers may be hot today, but tomorrow it will be Hispanic films. What happens then?"

These articles suggest that in the early 1990s, the mainstream press in the US employed the term "black films" (or "black movies") in reference to films directed by, and starring, African Americans, which, it was assumed, would appeal primarily to African American audiences.⁷⁾ Such black films were said to be significant for the American film industry for two reasons: they had commercial potential (especially when they managed to attract both white and black movie-goers), and they could be seen as a positive response to persistent criticism of the film industry's racially biased representational, and "lily-white" employment, practices.

As a genre category, black film has a substantial history. For example, at the height of the blaxploitation cycle of 1971–1975, a *New York Times* headline from July 1972 read: "Black films are in, so are profits",⁸⁾ and a few months later the paper published a debate between prominent African American commentators entitled "Black movie boom — good or bad?"⁹⁾ At this point in time, black films were defined by their African American casts, subject matter, and primary audience; only a small number had African American directors. Nevertheless, although much of the early 1970s debate about black films focused on the representation of the lives of African American characters on screen and whether or not these films benefitted African Americans, the press also highlighted the new employment opportunities for African American filmmakers opened up by the "black movie boom", as in the following *New York Times* headline from June 1972: "Now, a boom in

5) Ibid., p. 23.

6) I am using the term "black-helmed" rather than "black-directed", because the latter could be misunderstood (as in "directed at blacks" instead of "directed by blacks").

7) Confusingly, films not directed by African Americans might, under certain circumstances, also be described as "black films", if they featured a black star (like Eddie Murphy) or dealt with the life of African Americans (as *THE COLOR PURPLE* did), and hence were assumed, once again, to have a particular appeal to African American audiences. For a later *Variety* survey of developments across the 1990s which employs both narrow and broad definitions of the term "black film" see Dade Hayes, 'Black talent charts gains over decade', *Variety*, 3 March 2002, p. 6.

8) George Gent, 'Black films are in, so are profits', *New York Times*, 18 July 1972, p. 22.

9) Gordon Parks and Junius Griffin, 'Black movie boom — good or bad?', *New York Times*, 17 December 1972, p. D3.

black directors".¹⁰⁾ What is more, partly inspired by black-helmed films such as Melvin Van Peebles' *SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASSSSSS SONG* (1971),¹¹⁾ film scholars also became heavily invested in black film as a genre category, leading to several book-length studies ranging from Thomas Cripps' *Black Film as Genre* (1978) to Gladstone L. Yearwood's *Black Film as a Signifying Practice* (2000).¹²⁾ Although initially focused on films made by black directors, scholarship on black film has opened up this category so as to include selected films made by whites as well.¹³⁾

This rich tradition in academic Film Studies is at odds with the intermittent usage of "black film" in the American movie industry's own discourse and in writing about American cinema in the general press. Of course, there is nothing unusual about scholarly categories diverging from the ways in which the film industry itself labels its products.¹⁴⁾ Yet, it is noteworthy that the moniker "black film" appears to come into widespread use in the trade and general press only at particular historical moments, most notably in the early 1970s and in the early 1990s. During both periods, the press emphasized the commercial potential of black films. This commercial potential was seen to derive from their presumed appeal to African American cinemagoers (who, in the 1970s — as in the 1990s — had been responsible for a larger share of ticket sales than their small share of the American population would have suggested)¹⁵⁾ and from the films' potential to cross over and attract members of the white majority. However, writing about black films tended to acknowledge that crossover appeal was difficult to achieve and even more difficult to maintain. Indeed, as with the early 1990s, the black film boom of the early 1970s did not last for long.¹⁶⁾

In this essay, then, I examine the early 1990s boom by drawing on production information, box office data, and audience breakdowns for films made by black directors.¹⁷⁾ My aim is to provide a better understanding of decisions made in the American film industry about the production of such films and of decisions made by theatergoers about whether

10) James P. Murray, 'Now, a boom in black directors', *New York Times*, 4 June 1972, p. D11.

11) See Thomas Cripps, 'Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song and the changing politics of genre film', in Peter Lehman (ed.), *Close Viewings: An Anthology of New Film Criticism* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1990), pp. 238–61.

12) Thomas Cripps, *Black Film as Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978); Gladstone L. Yearwood *Black Film as a Signifying Practice: Cinema, Narration and the African-American Aesthetic Tradition* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2000).

13) See Tommy L. Lott, 'A no-theory theory of contemporary black cinema', in Valerie Smith (ed.), *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), pp. 83–96.

14) See Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), especially chapter 7.

15) Cp. Lee Beaupre, 'One third film public: negro', *Variety*, 29 November 1967, p. 3.

16) See Peter Krämer and Eithne Quinn, 'Blaxploitation', in Michael Hammond and Linda Ruth Williams (eds), *Contemporary American Cinema* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006), pp. 184–5, 188–98.

17) The research for this essay covered numerous folders of clippings files at the Performing Arts Research Centre (PARC) of the New York Public Library and at the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), Beverly Hills. The hundreds of clippings, for the decades from the 1960s onwards, in the folders entitled "Audiences", "Audience — Cinema — US" and "Cinema — Statistics — US" at PARC as well as "Audiences" and "Surveys" at AMPAS included almost no references to African Americans. Fortunately, a significant number of clippings for this period can be found in the folders entitled "Black Films", "Blacks in Films", and "Blacks and Films" at AMPAS and in various folders entitled "Negro in Cinema — US" at PARC. However, very few of these contain hard data.

or not to pay to see them. I am dealing with films made by black directors and their commercial performance because I am concerned with employment practices in the American film industry; these are of considerable interest, given the fact that the industry has long been known for its exclusionary practices with regard to black behind-the-camera personnel.¹⁸⁾ What is more, there is a glaring disparity between the overall socio-cultural liberalism (among other things with regards to race relations) of leading industry personnel,¹⁹⁾ and the disturbing fact that a 1982 survey of the film industry elite found that, more than almost any other elite group in American society, it was made up of whites (who accounted for almost ninety-nine percent of this elite).²⁰⁾ This statistic raises the question of why the liberal establishment of the American film industry was so reluctant to employ black directors. In addition to deep-seated racial biases which characterize the attitudes and behavior even of American liberals,²¹⁾ the answer to this question is also likely to have had something to do with the commercial performance of the kinds of film that tended to be made by black directors.

As it turns out, in the early 1990s (and also, with very few exceptions such as Michael Schultz's *SGT. PEPPER'S LONELY HEARTS CLUB BAND* /1978/, in preceding decades), black directors worked on black-themed films. This correlation may have been a result of their particular choice of projects or of industry typecasting. Either way, when assessing the box office performance of films made by black directors, I am not assuming that the films' marketing campaigns emphasized the director's race or that a director's race influenced directly the decisions of potential theatergoers (although this may well have been the case in some instances). I am, however, working on the basis that the commercial success or failure of these films influenced subsequent industry decisions about whether or not to invest in black directors, as long as they continued to be associated with black-themed projects. It is also important to note in this context that, during the early 1990s, certain types of black-themed films (notably low-budget comedies and urban crime dramas)²²⁾ were the almost exclusive domain of black directors.

18) See Jesse Algeon Rhines, *Black Film/White Money* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), chapter 6; Eithne Quinn, 'Sincere fictions: the production cultures of whiteness in late 1960s Hollywood', *The Velvet Light Trap*, vol. 67 (Spring 2011), pp. 3–13; Eithne Quinn, 'Closing doors: Hollywood, jobs and the revitalization of conservative racial politics', *Journal of American History*, vol. 99, no. 2 (September 2012), forthcoming.

19) Stephen Powers, David J. Rothman and Stanley Rothman, *Hollywood's America: Social and Political Themes in Motion Pictures* (Boulder: Westview, 1996), chapter 3, especially p. 67. Also see chapter 9 about minority representations in hit movies across the last few decades.

20) *Ibid.*, p. 53.

21) Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), chapters 2–3.

22) I have derived the label "urban crime dramas" from an item in *Variety* which identifies the films I am discussing as "urban crime stories". See Anon., 'B.O. from the "hood"', *Variety*, 9 November 1998, p. 18. Elsewhere this type of film has been discussed as "hood films" or "ghetto action films" and, with regards to the early 1970s, as blaxploitation. See, for example, Norman K. Denzin, *Reading Race: Hollywood and the Cinema of Racial Violence* (London: Sage, 2002); Paula J. Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003); Keith M. Harris, *Boys, Boyz, Bois: An Ethics of Black Masculinity in Film and Popular Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

In the first section of this essay I discuss the increased output of black-helmed films from 1990 to 1993, dealing both with the considerable box office success these films achieved and with the limitations to their commercial potential.²³⁾ A detailed analysis of these limitations is offered in the second section with respect to the most prominent group of black-helmed films of the early 1990s: urban crime dramas. These films were caught up in public debates about race and violence, which enhanced their profile while also, possibly, restricting their audience base. In the third section, I compare the output of urban crime dramas with that of comedies made by black directors, which appear to have had a greater commercial potential.

The Revival of Black Films

That films made by black directors were indeed making a major comeback, for the first time since the heyday of blaxploitation in the first half of the 1970s, was widely noted in the early 1990s both by industry observers and by industry insiders. For example, Warrington Hudlin, producer of *HOUSE PARTY* and president of the Black Filmmakers Foundation, stated in March 1991: "In 1990 and 1991, more films with blacks behind the camera will be released than during the entire previous decade."²⁴⁾ While this claim was somewhat exaggerated, it did highlight a dramatic increase; later estimates suggest that on average six black-helmed films were released every year in the second half of the 1980s, while from 1990 to 1993 the average rose to thirteen.²⁵⁾

The increased production and release of these films was monitored closely by the press. Reports were initially hopeful about this revival, with the *Christian Science Monitor* asking in July 1990 whether soon "African-American movies will have as strong a presence on the culture scene as African-American music?"²⁶⁾ In March 1991, Twentieth Century Fox executive Tom Sherak declared in *Variety* that the release of *HOUSE PARTY* in 1990 had been "a benchmark", because, despite the fact that the film's marketing was addressed primarily to African Americans, "a lot of white people saw it, too."²⁷⁾ Similarly, according to director Mario Van Peebles, the action-oriented crime drama *NEW JACK CITY* "tested best with black audiences and went well with whites too."²⁸⁾

23) In this essay, I measure a film's commercial performance purely by its box office performance in the North American market. By the early 1990s, American films tended to generate the majority of their income from foreign markets and video. However, reliable figures are not easily available for foreign markets or video. What is more, it was generally assumed that the relative success of a film at the North American box office would be mirrored in foreign markets and on video, so that the North American box office is a good indicator of a film's overall commercial performance.

24) Lawrence Cohn, 'Blacks taking the helm', *Variety*, 18 March 1991, p. 108. A similar claim can be found in Nina J. Easton, 'Black films' new crossover campaign', *Newsday*, 18 June 1991, Part II, p. 45.

25) Rhines, *Black Film/White Money*, p. 146; Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p. 120; Lawrence Cohn, 'Poetic justice', *Premiere*, July 1994, p. 41.

26) David Sterritt, 'Blacks in the mainstream', *Christian Science Monitor*, 2 July 1990, p. 13.

27) Anne Thompson, 'Charting the grey area of "crossover" pictures', *Variety*, 18 March 1991, unpaginated clipping in the 'Negro in Cinema — US — 1990–1999' folder, PARC.

28) *Ibid.*

As it turned out, 1991 was indeed a "break through year", with nineteen releases, up from nine in 1990.²⁹⁾ These releases came from the major studios as well as from independent distributors,³⁰⁾ and included several box office hits as well as a number of flops (which is to be expected of any group of releases). While none of these hits matched the blockbuster success of films such as *TERMINATOR 2: JUDGMENT DAY*, the biggest US hit of 1991 with a domestic theatrical gross of \$205m, some of the black-helmed films grossed several times their production costs, most notably the urban crime dramas *BOYZ N THE HOOD* (cost \$6m, domestic theatrical gross \$56m),³¹⁾ *NEW JACK CITY* (cost \$8.5m, gross \$47m) and the extremely low-budget effort *STRAIGHT OUT OF BROOKLYN* (cost \$0.3m, gross \$2.7m), as well as the comedy *HOUSE PARTY 2* (cost \$4m, gross \$19.2m) and, to a lesser extent, Spike Lee's drama about interracial romance *JUNGLE FEVER* (cost \$14m, gross \$32m).³²⁾ In addition to reporting on these successes, the press noted that budgets for black-helmed films were rising. All of the 1991 films (as well as those from 1990) cost much less to produce than the industry average for releases by major companies of \$26m;³³⁾ yet, two of the 1992 releases — the Hudlin brothers' Eddie Murphy comedy *BOOMERANG* and Spike Lee's epic biopic *MALCOLM X* — were allocated budgets matching or exceeding this average.³⁴⁾ With bigger budgets came the expectation of a greater marketing effort and hence perhaps the chance to emulate the anticipated grosses of Hollywood's calculated blockbusters.

Articles about the revival of black-helmed films almost invariably contained a note of caution however. To begin with, the initial expectations of a substantial crossover audience were quickly disappointed. The audience for Bill Duke's \$8m Chester Himes adaptation *A RAGE IN HARLEM* (1991), for example, was reported to be between eighty and eighty-five percent black, and, with its \$10m gross, the film barely recouped its production budget at the US box office; similarly, the first week audience for *BOYZ N THE HOOD* was estimated to be seventy-five percent black.³⁵⁾ With budgets for black-helmed films rising

29) David J. Fox, 'A year of few black films', *Newsday*, 18 August 1992, p. 45; Cohn, 'Blacks Taking the Helm', p. 41. While Fox gives the number of 1991 releases as "about 20", Cohn gives it as 19.

30) With a few important exceptions — notably *SHE'S GOTTA HAVE IT* (Island Pictures), *HOUSE PARTY* (New Line Cinema), and 1991's *STRAIGHT OUT OF BROOKLYN* (The Samuel Goldwyn Company) — most of the high-profile black-helmed films of the late 1980s and very early 1990s were distributed by the major studios.

31) Unless otherwise stated, the term gross is to be understood throughout this essay as referring to the domestic (i.e. US and Canada) theatrical ticket sale revenue generated by a given film.

32) Michael Fleming, 'Black helmers look beyond the "hood"', *Variety*, 20 January 1992, p. 23. Only one of the 1990 releases had performed similarly (*HOUSE PARTY*; cost \$6m, gross \$25m), while the other two high profile releases of the year did less well: Spike Lee's jazz drama *MO' BETTER BLUES* cost \$10m and grossed \$16m, and Sidney Poitier's \$20m comedy *GHOST DAD* grossed \$22m. These figures are taken from the German magazine *steadycam*, which has derived them from the American trade press; it should be noted that budget figures tend to vary slightly from source to source. See Anon., 'In Zahlen', *steadycam*, no. 18 (Spring 1991), p. 14.

33) Tracy Stevens (ed.), *International Motion Picture Almanac* (Larchmont: Quigley Publishing, 2001), p. 13.

34) Fleming, 'Black Helmers', p. 23. At this point *MALCOLM X* was budgeted at \$25m, yet eventually it cost \$34m. *BOOMERANG* became the most expensive black-helmed film ever with a final budget of \$50m. See Anon., 'In Zahlen', *steadycam*, no. 24 (Spring 1993), p. 12.

35) Easton, 'Black films' new crossover campaign', p. 45; Richard Bernstein, 'Hollywood seeks a white audience for new black films', *New York Times*, 17 July 1991, p. C13. Bernstein noted, however, that Spike Lee's films "reportedly attract blacks and whites in roughly equal numbers". According to another article, audiences for

in 1992, it became ever more important to attract white Americans.³⁶⁾ At the same time, it was important for these films to do well in foreign markets; however, industry insiders agreed with New Line Cinema executive Janet Grillo, who declared: "So far, there is no foreign value for most of these movies."³⁷⁾ Furthermore, a 1991 study by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) found that the overall employment situation for blacks in the American film industry was not improving; while black directors often hired largely African American crews, in general blacks made up less — in many cases far less — than five percent of film crews.³⁸⁾

In the context of rising budgets and apparently limited market chances for black-helmed films, as well as a paucity of black personnel being hired, it is not surprising that the output of such films declined again after 1991, going down from nineteen to thirteen in 1992 and to eleven in 1993 (which is almost as low as the figure for 1990).³⁹⁾ However, this reduced output included an increasing number of relatively high grossing films. These films fell broadly into two categories — low-budget crime dramas with domestic theatrical grosses of \$20m–\$30m,⁴⁰⁾ and medium-to-big-budget star vehicles with domestic theatrical grosses of \$40m–\$70m. The latter included 1992's *BOOMERANG* (cost \$50m, gross \$66m), Kevin Hooks' 1992 action film *PASSENGER 57* (starring Wesley Snipes, cost \$19m, gross \$43m), and Bill Duke's 1993 comedy *SISTER ACT 2: BACK IN THE HABIT* (starring Whoopi Goldberg, cost \$26m, gross \$50m).⁴¹⁾ Due to these moderate hits, overall ticket sales for black-helmed films were holding up quite well after 1991; they went up from 40 million to 42 million in 1992 and then down to 29 million in 1993 (still almost twice the figure for 1990, which was 15 million).⁴²⁾

NEW JACK CITY were ninety percent non-white, for *JUICE* (1992) eighty-five percent non-white, and for *BOYZ N THE HOOD* fifty-five percent non-white; Charles Fleming, 'Testing. Testing. Why the testing?', *Variety*, 17 February 1992, p. 94. The lower figure for *BOYZ N THE HOOD* quoted here would seem to suggest that the film initially attracted mostly African Americans (hence the seventy-five percent figure given in Bernstein's article from July 1991), yet later crossed over to white audiences.

36) Easton, 'Black films' new crossover campaign, p. 45.

37) Fleming, 'Black helmers', p. 23.

38) Michael Fleming, 'Blacks see red over lily-white film crews', *Variety*, 14 October 1991, pp. 3, 261; See also Anon., 'Report says blacks are underhired in Hollywood', *New York Times*, 24 September 1991, p. C13. Fleming reported that on black-helmed films up to 80% of crew members were African American.

39) Cohn, 'Blacks taking the helm', p. 41. It should be noted that in the early 1990s, over 380 new films were released every year in the US (about 150 by the major studios and the rest by independent distributors), which means that black directors accounted for less, in most years much less, than 5% of the overall output.

See MPAA, '2001 US Economic Review', Motion Picture Association of America, <<http://www.mpa.org/useconomicreview/2001Economic/index.htm>>, slide 11 [accessed 20 May 2012]

40) For example, Ernest Dickerson's 1992 film *JUICE* (cost \$6m, gross \$20m), Allen and Albert Hughes' 1993 film *MENACE II SOCIETY* (cost \$3.5m, gross \$27m), and John Singleton's 1993 film *POETIC JUSTICE* (cost \$13m, gross \$27m). See Anon., 'In Zahlen', *steadycam*, no. 24 (Spring 1993), p. 12; Anon., 'In Zahlen', *steadycam*, no. 26 (Spring 1994), p. 10. As with most of the 1991 urban crime dramas, these films did not feature established film stars; instead they used major music stars, including a host of rappers as well as soul singer Janet Jackson.

41) We can also include in this group 1992's *MALCOLM X* (cost \$34m, gross \$47m), although the film is associated at least as much with its director as it is with its star (Denzel Washington). See Anon., 'In Zahlen', *steadycam*, no. 24 (Spring 1993), p. 12.

42) Cohn, 'Poetic justice', p. 41. Cohn does not provide any figures for the late 1980s, but his all-time chart of the thirty biggest selling films by African American directors suggests that the success of *HARLEM NIGHTS*

Thus, there appeared to be a return to the traditionally small output of black-helmed films while overall audience figures — as well as average budgets — for these films remained at a higher level than they had been before the break-through year of 1991. Black directors seemed to have found two important niches in the overall output of the American film industry: working cheaply on largely black-cast films dealing with urban crime, or working with bigger budgets on black star vehicles. In addition, the success of *HOUSE PARTY 2* in 1991 was indicative of a third potential niche for black filmmakers: low-budget black-cast comedies. I will now investigate black-themed urban crime dramas and comedies in more detail, highlighting the problematic features of these niches and hence the problems black filmmakers faced in sustaining their careers within them.

The Limited Appeal of Urban Crime Dramas by Black Directors

Towards the end of 1991, a *Variety* headline asked: "Are Retailers Selling Black Movies Short?"⁴³⁾ The article noted that recent Spike Lee movies and black-helmed urban crime dramas were much in demand on home video, generating more rentals per copy than comparable films made by white directors. However, video stores stocked fewer copies of these films than they did copies of non-black films that had generated similar box office grosses. Hence, *Variety* argued, "consumer demand for movies by African-American filmmakers is exceeding the supply in the rental marketplace".⁴⁴⁾ Industry observers also noted that this reluctance to make available a sufficient number of video copies of black-helmed films was particularly damaging in the light of problems these films had encountered during their respective theatrical releases. On the one hand, they simply were not distributed everywhere; thus, in many areas they were not widely available until their video release.⁴⁵⁾ On the other hand, in some cases, such as *BOYZ N THE HOOD*, the theatrical release had been surrounded by controversy:

(which both starred and was directed by Eddie Murphy) and Spike Lee's *DO THE RIGHT THING* brought the figure for 1989 to over 20 million ticket sales — but probably not much more than 20 million, because there do not seem to be any other black-helmed films selling significant numbers of tickets that year. Similarly, only Robert Townsend's *EDDIE MURPHY RAW*, showing Eddie Murphy in concert, was a major success in 1987 (with 12.8 million tickets sold). According to a 1991 list of the black-helmed films with the highest rentals (usually about half the gross), there were three minor successes in 1986 (Spike Lee's *SHE'S GOTTA HAVE IT*, Prince's *UNDER THE CHERRY MOON*, and Richard Pryor's *JO JO DANCER*) with an estimated combined gross of \$34m, which translates to about 9 million tickets sold (at an average ticket price of \$3.70). The two minor successes of 1988 (*I'M GONNA GIT YOU SUCKA* and *SCHOOL DAZE*) sold around 6 million tickets each. Thus, annual tickets sales for black-helmed films from 1986 to 1989 were variable, with the peak years matching or exceeding sales in 1990, but staying well below the figures for 1991–93. See Anon., 'Top films by black directors', *Variety*, 18 March 1991, p. 108.

43) Marc Berman, 'Are retailers selling black movies short?', *Variety*, 18 November 1991, p. 16; See also Lewis Beale, 'Straight out of Hollywood: rental video sales lag for black films', *Newsday*, 12 March 1992, p. 41.

44) Berman, 'Are retailers selling black movies short?', p. 16.

45) Berman, 'Are retailers selling black movies short?', p. 16. Laura Baker argues that, in the early 1990s, there were "few first-run movie houses located immediately proximate to or in black inner-city communities; to see first-run product residents must travel to suburban or downtown mall multiplexes". Alternatively, they could wait for a belated run in an inner-city cinema, or for the video release. Baker also suggests that mall cinemas were reluctant to book films made by black directors, in particular urban crime dramas, because

because reports of violence at the film's opening deterred some moviegoers from seeing it at a theater, the video release seems to be the perfect opportunity for *BOYZ N THE HOOD* to reach a much wider audience.⁴⁶⁾

The same applied to *NEW JACK CITY*, which in March 1991 had been the first high-profile black film released that year. Reports about theater riots and about shootings at screenings of *NEW JACK CITY* and later *BOYZ N THE HOOD* were circulated widely, often suggesting a link between the gang violence depicted on the screen and violence amongst black moviegoers.⁴⁷⁾ It is easy to see that such reports may have had a negative impact on the theatrical attendance of these films and also possibly on future theatrical bookings of similar films, which would therefore be less likely to receive wide distribution.⁴⁸⁾

In fact, reports about theater violence only confirmed pre-existing fears. In 1989, the release of Spike Lee's *DO THE RIGHT THING*, an inner city drama culminating in a race riot, had been accompanied by concerns in mainstream media about the film's potential to incite violent action.⁴⁹⁾ Nothing untoward happened, and, with a \$26m gross on a \$6m production budget, the film went on to become one of the surprise successes that paved the way for the American film industry's dramatically increased investment in black-helmed films in the early 1990s.⁵⁰⁾ However, the anxieties remained, and at the time of *NEW JACK CITY*'s theatrical release in March 1991, *Variety* noted that the latest wave of black-themed urban crime dramas would have to work hard "to break through exhibitor resistance based on violent incidents connected with the release of some blaxploitation pics 20 years ago."⁵¹⁾ Two months later, in June 1991, *Newsday* revealed the contemporary source of such concerns when it emphasized how great a challenge it was

they "threatened to attract an audience neither white enough nor wealthy enough to be compatible with the public merchandised by the mall". See Laura Baker, 'Screening race: responses to theater violence at *NEW JACK CITY* and *BOYZ N THE HOOD*', *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 44 (Fall 1999), pp. 12–3.

46) Beale, 'Straight Out Of Hollywood', p. 41.

47) See Baker, 'Screening Race', pp. 4–9. Baker notes that the release of several films made by white directors, such as *COLORS* (1988), had similarly been accompanied by violent incidents, yet "none of these films were subjected to the extensive and sensationalistic media scrutiny that *NEW JACK CITY* and *BOYZ N THE HOOD* received". Baker, 'Screening Race', p. 5. Concerns about the negative influence of black-helmed urban dramas on African American audiences were renewed in January 1994, when a group of black youth went on a crime spree apparently inspired by *MENACE II SOCIETY*. See Robin R. Means Coleman, 'The *Menace II Society* copycat murder case and thug life: a reception study of a convicted criminal', in Robin R. Means Coleman (ed.), *Say It Loud! African-American Audiences, Media, and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 249–84. See also, Celeste A. Fisher, "'America's worst nightmare': reading the ghetto in a culturally diverse context', in *Say It Loud!*, pp. 229–48'; Celeste A. Fisher, *Black on Black: Urban Youth Films and the Multicultural Audience* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2006).

48) According to Baker, due to the controversy a few theaters pulled *NEW JACK CITY* and *BOYZ N THE HOOD* from their screens prematurely; however, this does not seem to have had a significant impact on their overall release. See Baker, 'Screening race', p. 9. See also S. Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 189–91. The longer term impact on future bookings as well as production decisions was probably more important, although it is difficult to trace.

49) See Sharon Willis, *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 163–5.

50) Anon., 'In Zahlen', *steadycam*, no. 15 (Spring 1990), p. 10.

51) Cohn, 'Blacks taking the helm', p. 108.

to draw an interracial audience to films with African-American themes and casts, and often potent social messages, at a time when the United States is plagued by polarized race relations.⁵²⁾

There are many ways to gauge the differences in the life experiences and attitudes of black Americans and non-blacks around 1990;⁵³⁾ however, the most important symptom of this racial polarization clearly was the videotaped beating of Rodney King by members of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) on 3 March 1991, as well as the aftermath of this event. Ronald N. Jacobs has traced the increasingly divergent responses of the black press and mainstream media to the beating itself, to the various official investigations of the incident and of the operations of the LAPD more generally, and to the delayed resignation of Police Chief Daryl Gates (which was announced in July 1991).⁵⁴⁾ Jacobs concludes that mainstream media neither addressed "African-American concerns about white insincerity or African-American empowerment, nor did they deal with the history of police brutality in a significant or engaged manner".⁵⁵⁾ When the trial against the four police officers involved in the beating resulted in the return of a not-guilty verdict on 29 April 1992, riots broke out in Los Angeles, and the racial polarization of public opinion became ever more pronounced. Jacobs notes that the verdict and the subsequent public disorder "created a period of public focus and attention on race equaled by few events in recent American history" with one opinion poll showing that "ninety-two percent of those surveyed were following the Los Angeles events either closely or very closely, a figure even greater than public attention to the Persian Gulf War".⁵⁶⁾ Other polls showed that over ninety percent of African Americans disagreed with the verdict as opposed to about seventy percent of whites.⁵⁷⁾ And, while the initial response to the riots by both whites and blacks was equally negative (with about seventy-five percent of respondents being critical of the violence), later focus-group discussions revealed that

African-American informants interpreted the television images of the uprisings as legitimate protest against racial and economic injustice; white and Latino informants, by contrast, interpreted the events primarily as criminal activities by anti-civil opportunists.⁵⁸⁾

52) Easton, 'Black films' new crossover campaign', p. 45.

53) See, for example, Chery Russell, *The Master Trend: How the Baby Boom Generation Is Remaking America* (New York: Plenum, 1993), chapter 22; Sam Roberts, *Who We Are: A Portrait of America Based on the Latest U.S. Census* (New York: Times Books, 1995), chapter 5; Howard Schuman et al, *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations. Revised Edition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), chapters 3, 5.

54) Ronald N. Jacobs, *Race, Media and the Crisis of Civil Society: From Watts to Rodney King* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), chapter 4.

55) Ibid., p. 111.

56) Ibid., p. 114.

57) Ibid., p. 115.

58) Ibid., pp. 119, 132. See Darnell M. Hunt, *Screening the Los Angeles 'Riots': Race, Seeing, and Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), esp. pp. 128-9. An even more comprehensive and intense public debate about race took place in 1994/5 with the arrest and trial of former sports star and actor O. J. Simpson for the double murder of his ex-wife and one of her friends, which generated record breaking TV ratings and gave further evidence of racially divided perceptions: "An opinion poll taken immediately

The release in the early 1990s of black-helmed urban crime dramas, which centered on the violent lives of young black men (featuring both as victims and as perpetrators of violence) thus coincided with the intensification and increased divisiveness of longer standing public debates about race, violence, and crime. In some quarters, the films' box office performance may have been helped by their topical resonances.⁵⁹⁾ However, the highly charged debates also help to explain why industry observers were apprehensive about the release of these films, why violent incidents at their screenings received so much media attention, and why both moviegoers and theater owners may have become particularly sensitized to reports about audience violence. The racially polarized public debate also indicates that many non-blacks were reluctant to sympathize with the plight of black urban youth. This notion in turn helps to explain the limited crossover potential of black crime dramas, which, to a greater or lesser extent, depends on audience sympathy for their black and often criminal protagonists. There is also evidence that the racial polarization of public opinion was paralleled by a general polarization of entertainment choices. Analyses of TV audiences showed that in the 1990/91 season, "only three of the top 10-rated shows among black viewers were among the top 10 favorites of general viewing audiences", which was down from five in the previous season.⁶⁰⁾ For the next three seasons, there was no overlap at all.⁶¹⁾

However, this is not the whole story, because whatever racial barriers and racially differentiated preferences may have existed with regard to cinema and television, they did not exist to the same extent — at least for young people — in the field of music. Providing urban crime dramas both with their soundtracks and with many actors, gangsta rap — which also depicted the experiences of black urban youth as being centered on sex, drugs, and violence — crossed over into the mainstream in the early 1990s. This shift was signaled most forcefully by the fact that Dr. Dre's *The Chronic* was among the ten top selling albums of 1993 and Snoop Doggy Dogg's *Doggystyle* was in the top ten for 1994.⁶²⁾ At the same time, it was reported that in the 1993/94 television season, there was "[f]or the first

after the verdict found that eighty-five percent of African-Americans agreed with the not-guilty verdict, while only thirty-two percent of whites agreed with it". Hunt, *Screening the Los Angeles 'Riots'*, p. 137. See also Paul Thaler, *The Spectacle: Media and the Making of the O. J. Simpson Story* (Westport: Praeger, 1997); Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), chapter 7.

59) See Amanda Ann Klein, *American Film Cycles: Reframing Genres, Screening Social Problems, and Defining Subcultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), chapter 4. Klein examines the marketing and critical reception of key films in the cycle of black-helmed urban crime dramas.

60) Anon., 'Study shows wider gap in TV tastes', *Newsday*, 6 November 1991, p. 55. An earlier survey found that in 1963 four out of the top ten shows among black viewers were also among the top ten for whites, which suggests that such overlap had a long history before it decreased, and then vanished, in the early 1990s; James W. Carey, 'Variations in negro/white television preferences', *Journal of Broadcasting*, vol. 10, no. 3 (Summer 1965), p. 201.

61) Elizabeth Kolbert, 'TV viewing and selling, by race', *New York Times*, 5 April 1993, p. D7; Robert Silverman, 'Viewers split along racial lines', *New York Daily News*, 3 May 1994, p. 83.

62) People, *2001 People Entertainment Almanac* (New York: Cader, 2001), p. 226. For the development of gangsta rap, its crossover into the mainstream and its appeal to white youth, see Eithne Quinn, "*Nuthin' but a 'G' Thang*": *The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), chapter 4.

time ... significant crossover in TV preferences among black and non-black teenagers, 12–17", with six shows appearing in both top tens.⁶³⁾ The most successful show was *FRESH PRINCE OF BEL AIR* (1990–1996), starring Will Smith (number 3 in the black chart, number 1 overall), a fact which boded well for the crossover potential of the films in which Smith was appearing from 1993 onwards.⁶⁴⁾

Yet, the box office performance of black-helmed urban crime dramas was not improved by these developments in other media. First of all, we have to note that, probably in response to controversies surrounding the release of particular films and the reluctance of theater managers and video store owners to handle them, the American film industry reduced its output of urban crime dramas after 1991. One might expect that, due to the reduced competition for the audiences of this type of film, each of the few urban crime dramas being released would have stood a better chance of generating high levels of revenue.⁶⁵⁾ This was not the case, however, and no film came anywhere near the box office grosses of *BOYZ N THE HOOD* and *NEW JACK CITY*.⁶⁶⁾ As we have seen, in 1992 and 1993, low-budget urban crime dramas continued to do well, yet afterwards the commercial track record of films belonging to this cycle was distinctly uneven; the cycle included F. Gary Gray's highly profitable low-budget 1996 film *SET IT OFF* (cost \$11m, gross \$34m), but also Spike Lee's 1995 medium-budget flop *CLOCKERS* (cost \$28m, gross \$13m).⁶⁷⁾ Thus, it would seem that the industry's reduced output of black-helmed urban crime dramas, which had initially yielded such high returns, was commercially justified. The situation was quite different, however, when it came to comedies.

The Commercial Potential of Comedies by Black Directors

As we have seen, the success of *HOUSE PARTY* in 1990, first at the US Film Festival and then in US theaters, was perceived to be an important validation of the American film industry's willingness to employ more black directors than in previous years. Indeed, before the focus of public debate shifted toward urban crime dramas, beginning with the controversial release of *NEW JACK CITY* in March 1991, *Variety* identified comedy as the key genre in the new wave of black-helmed films.⁶⁸⁾ The trade paper noted the impressive track re-

63) Silverman, 'Viewers split', p. 83.

64) It would seem, however, that racial differences in TV viewing habits among the population as a whole continued to increase into the late 1990s; Entman and Rojecki, *The Black Image*, p. 144. It is also worth pointing out that several US surveys in the early 1990s identified *Gone with the Wind* (1939) as respondents' favorite movie of all time; it is hard to imagine that many African American respondents chose this film. Anon., 'Film fans' taste revealed in movie channel movie lover poll', *Boxoffice*, December 1991, p. 84; Anon., 'Educated moviegoer survey provides clues to viewing choices', *Boxoffice*, November 1993, p. 84.

65) At the same time, one might also expect the novelty value of films about the violent lives of black urban youth quickly to wear off after the initial wave of films in 1991, decreasing the box office chances of later productions.

66) See Anon., 'B.O.', p. 18.

67) Anon., 'In Zahlen', *steadycam*, no. 31 (Spring 1996), p. 11; Anon., 'In Zahlen', *steadycam*, no. 33 (Spring 1997), p. 21.

68) Cohn, 'Blacks taking the helm', p. 108.

cord of comedies made in the late 1980s by black directors (including low-budget films such as the Wayans brothers' blaxploitation parody *I'M GONNA GIT YOU SUCKA* [1988] and medium-budget star vehicles such as Eddie Murphy's directorial debut *HARLEM NIGHTS* [1989]).⁶⁹ *Variety* also emphasized the importance of comedy and musical comedy as well as more serious musical films in the release schedule for 1991 and with respect to the production plans of black directors. However, the outcomes were not always encouraging. Like the Sidney Poitier-directed Bill Cosby vehicle *GHOST DAD* (1990), films with bigger budgets performed below expectations. Charles Lane's Disney production *TRUE IDENTITY* (1991), for example, grossed a disastrous \$5m on a \$16m budget, while the Hudlin brothers' \$50m Eddie Murphy vehicle *BOOMERANG* (1992) grossed a disappointing \$66m.⁷⁰ Furthermore, several planned projects, including a "sci-fi musical comedy" by Reginald Hudlin, were abandoned.⁷¹

While it is understandable that the American film industry discontinued the production of bigger budget black-helmed comedies addressed to family and to adult audiences, the dearth in the first half of the 1990s of low-budget and youth-oriented black-helmed comedies is surprising. As we have seen, such films had consistently been turning a profit since the mid-1980s and the few low-budget comedies that were released after 1991 continued to do so. *MO' MONEY* (1992), which was scripted and executive produced (but not directed) by Damon Wayans cost \$9m and grossed \$40m, and *HOUSE PARTY 3* (1994) grossed \$19m on an \$8m budget. Later examples include F. Gary Gray's *FRIDAY* (1995) (cost \$11m, gross \$27m) and the Wayans brothers' 1996 production *DON'T BE A MENACE TO SOUTH CENTRAL WHILE DRINKING YOUR JUICE IN THE HOOD* (cost \$8m, gross \$20m).⁷² Unlike urban crime dramas (which *DON'T BE A MENACE* parodied), these comedies were not subjected to intense public scrutiny and did not spark controversy. One must therefore look elsewhere for reasons why the American film industry did not produce a much larger number of such black-helmed films after 1991, when demand was clearly there (much more so, it seems, than in the case of urban crime dramas). This re-

69) The relatively successful low-budget comedies of the late 1980s included, in addition to *I'M GONNA GIT YOU SUCKA* (gross c. \$11m), Robert Townsend's 1986 film *HOLLYWOOD SHUFFLE* (gross \$5.1m) and also Spike Lee's *SHE'S GOTTA HAVE IT* (cost \$0.2m, gross \$7m) and his musical comedy *SCHOOL DAZE* (cost \$6.5m, gross \$14.1m). The more expensive films were Eddie Murphy vehicles: 1989's *HARLEM NIGHTS* (cost \$26m, gross \$59m), in which Murphy directed himself, and Robert Townsend's 1987 film *EDDY MURPHY RAW* (gross \$50.4m). See Anon., 'In Zahlen', *steadycam*, no. 9 (Spring 1988), p. 6; Anon., 'In Zahlen', *steadycam*, no. 11 (Spring 1989), p. 13; Anon., 'In Zahlen', *steadycam*, no. 15 (Spring 1990), p. 10. The figure for *I'M GONNA GIT YOU SUCKA* is taken from Anon., 'Top films by black directors', *Variety*, 18 March 1991, p. 108. On Spike Lee see Watkins, *Representing*, p. 122. Watkins' gross figures are different from those given by *steadycam*, because he sometimes appears to include foreign revenues.

70) Fleming, 'Black helmers', p.23; Anon., 'In Zahlen', *steadycam*, no. 24 (Spring 1993), p. 12. Other comedies in the 1991 schedule included Michael Schultz' *LIVIN' LARGE* (cost \$5.5m, gross \$5.4m), Kevin Hooks' *STRICTLY BUSINESS* (cost \$6m, gross \$7.7m), and Topper Carew's *TALKIN' DIRTY AFTER DARK* (cost \$0.5m, gross \$1m). See Fleming, 'Black helmers', p. 23.

71) Cohn, 'Blacks taking the helm', p. 108.

72) Anon., 'In Zahlen', *steadycam*, no. 24 (Spring 1993), p. 12; Anon., 'In Zahlen', *steadycam*, no. 29 (Spring 1995), p. 9; Anon., 'In Zahlen', *steadycam*, no. 31 (Spring 1996), p. 12; Anon., 'In Zahlen', *steadycam*, no. 33 (Spring 1997), p. 21.

turns us, perhaps, to the American film industry's continuing reluctance to employ black personnel (unless they are performers).⁷³⁾

Conclusion

The early 1990s were a period of intense debate in trade papers, newspapers, magazines, and elsewhere about African American filmmakers, the films they made, and the audiences they reached. This debate was less concerned with the work of individual black directors, instead treating such directors as members of a racially defined group, which was severely underrepresented in the American film industry. Such underrepresentation also characterized the employment of African Americans on film crews, and was an issue that commentators, ranging from journalists working for the trade and general press to representatives of organizations such as the Black Filmmakers Foundation and the NAACP, wanted to see addressed. Addressing the problem appeared possible when several surprise hits were among the industry's dramatically increased 1990 and 1991 output of black-helmed films, which in turn were produced in response to the box office success of black star vehicles and of a few black-themed, black-helmed films in the second half of the 1980s. While they could not compete with Hollywood blockbusters, these films often had very large profit margins due to their low budgets.

Both outside commentators and industry insiders grouped films made by black directors together as "black films" (a genre category with a complicated history in both press and academic discourse). This categorization had a lot to do with the fact that the projects in which these directors were involved (projects they had developed themselves or for which they were hired by production companies) tended to have a black cast — as well as in many cases largely African American crews — and tended to deal with important aspects of African American life, most notably the experiences of urban youth. In an increasingly racially polarized society, two high grossing urban crime dramas of 1991 (NEW JACK CITY and BOYZ N THE HOOD) were surrounded by considerable controversy, which appears to have influenced the film industry's decisions about future investments in black-helmed films, insofar as the overall output of such films was drastically reduced after 1991 (although their average budgets increased, so that the overall sum of money invested in them was not reduced).

Judging by the box office performances of this smaller number of films, the reduction in the output of urban crime dramas was justified in commercial terms, due to their often low returns. However, in the light of the fact that the industry's steady output of low-budget black-themed comedies had been consistently profitable since the mid-1980s, the reduction in their number cannot be explained in financial terms, and instead suggests that the racial bias in the American film industry's employment practices was by no means

73) A quantitative content analysis of hit movies found that during the period 1976–1990 African Americans made up about 10 % of major and minor film characters, which is close to the percentage of African Americans in the US population; this also applied to the early 1990s. See Powers, Rothman, and Rothman, *Hollywood's America*, pp. 175, 193.

overcome in the early 1990s. It should also be noted, however, that, at the same time, black directors were employed on an increasing number of medium to big-budget vehicles for African American film stars (notably those starring Eddie Murphy and Whoopi Goldberg). These black star vehicles, which — with important exceptions such as *BOOMERANG* — tended to have predominantly white casts, were among the highest-grossing black-helmed films during this period, although due to their big budgets they were not always profitable.

This analysis of a particular moment in the history of black directors working in the American film industry has operated at the group level: instead of examining the careers of individual African American filmmakers, I considered them as a group; and instead of looking at the operations of individual companies, I dealt with trends across the industry as a whole. This level of abstraction should make it easier to compare the early 1990s with other periods in American film history, notably the early 1970s. So far, academic work on black films during these two periods, and during other periods as well, has placed heavy emphasis on what I have called urban crime dramas. The research presented in this essay, however, foregrounds the important role of comedy in the output of black directors during the early 1990s, which raises the question of whether comedy has played a similarly important, yet overlooked role in other periods of black filmmaking as well.⁷⁴⁾

I also want to suggest that my discussion of the early 1990s could fruitfully be complemented by work on individual filmmakers and companies. To begin with, one might investigate the respective roles of major studios and independent producers and distributors in the black film boom of the early 1990s. Initial research on this issue suggests that, up to and including 1991, the major studios were largely driving the boom, and that the reduction in the number of black-helmed film releases in subsequent years was due mainly to the reduced involvement of the majors, which left much of this field to the independents, especially New Line Cinema. Of particular interest is the Walt Disney Company, which straddled the major/independent divide in surprising ways. In the mid-1990s, Disney released several black-helmed films, notably *DON'T BE A MENACE TO SOUTH CENTRAL WHILE DRINKING YOUR JUICE IN THE HOOD* (1996), through Miramax (a previously independent company Disney had bought in 1993), while also, for example, releasing the Hughes brothers' historical war and crime drama *DEAD PRESIDENTS* (1995) under its Hollywood label. In addition, the Disney company was responsible for one of the most successful black-themed comedies, as well as for the highest grossing drama about black urban youth of the first half of the 1990s, both of which, however, featured white stars and were made without substantial involvement of black personnel behind the camera: 1993's *COOL RUNNINGS* co-starring John Candy (cost \$14m, gross \$65m) and 1995's *DANGEROUS MINDS* starring Michelle Pfeiffer (cost \$45m, gross \$84m).⁷⁵⁾ One wonders, given the com-

74) To answer this question, one might begin by looking at some of the recent work on film comedies featuring black performers (both male and female); see for example David J. Leonard, *Screens Fade to Black: Contemporary African American Cinema* (Westport: Praeger, 2006), especially chapter 4; Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Audrey Thomas McCluskey, *Richard Pryor: The Life and Legacy of a "Crazy" Black Man* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Mia Mask, *Divas on Screen: Black Women in American Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), chapter 3.

75) Anon., 'In Zahlen', *steadycam*, no. 26 (Spring 1994), p. 10; Anon., 'In Zahlen', *steadycam*, no. 31 (Spring 1996), p. 12.

pany's willingness to work with black filmmakers (in evidence as early as Charles Lane's *TRUE IDENTITY* in 1991), why both of these black-themed films were given to white directors.

There are also important questions to be asked about the career trajectories across the 1990s and into the new millennium of individual black filmmakers: What kinds of projects did they pursue, and on what kinds of film did they end up working? How did these projects change over time? Here one might want to pay particular attention to three possible career transitions. The first is from low-budget to medium, even big-budget filmmaking.⁷⁶⁾ Initially, almost all of the bigger-budget films made by black directors were films starring or co-starring black performers. Here, it would seem, comedy was once again a central genre, which is most forcefully exemplified by the enormous commercial success of the Wayans' brothers *SCARY MOVIE*, a horror parody with a racially mixed cast, which in 2000 became the highest grossing black-helmed film of all time (with a domestic theatrical gross of \$157m, against a budget of \$19m).⁷⁷⁾ However, films about urban youth and crime also continued to be important, as evidenced by John Singleton's 2003 action movie *2 FAST 2 FURIOUS* (cost \$76m, gross \$127m), another film with a mixed cast. The second possible transition is from black-themed films and black star vehicles to films without substantial roles for black performers, nor any particular engagement with black issues. In many ways, this shift constitutes a move out of a black-identified directorial niche, which can lead to bigger budgets and bigger grosses. Examples include the Hughes' brothers 2001 Jack the Ripper movie *FROM HELL* (cost \$35m, gross \$32m) and F. Gary Gray's 2003 remake of the classic heist movie *THE ITALIAN JOB* (cost \$60m, gross \$106m). Finally, there are the cases of black directors who could not sustain a career in the movies at all; many of these eventually made the transition to television (on a temporary or permanent basis).⁷⁸⁾

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76) For accounts of Spike Lee's struggles to get bigger budgets in the late 1980s see for example William R. Grant IV, *Post-Soul Black Cinema: Discontinuities, Innovations, and Breakpoints, 1970–1995* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 50–8.

77) Box office and budget figures in this paragraph are taken from Boxofficemojo.com, <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com>> [accessed 21 May 2012].

78) Examples include Bill Duke and Mario Van Peebles, both of whom have worked mainly for television since the mid-1990s and the early 2000s, respectively. I should add, however, that before they participated in the black film boom of the early 1990s, they had worked for television as well.

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SUMMARY

"Black is In".

Race and Genre in Early 1990s American Cinema

Peter Krämer

In 1990 and 1991, the American press identified a boom in "black films". This term — which has a long and complicated history in scholarly and journalistic writing — was used to refer to films made by African American directors, which starred African Americans and were assumed primarily to appeal to black audiences. This essay examines various factors contributing to the emergence of this black film boom and to its rapid decline after 1991. It contrasts the two main genres in which black directors were working at this time — urban crime dramas and comedies. In an increasingly racially polarized society, urban crime dramas encountered numerous difficulties limiting their commercial viability, while — with only few exceptions — comedies by black directors were consistently profitable. The American film industry's reluctance to sustain the production of such comedies confirms long-standing concerns about its racially biased employment practices.