

Fiction rooted in South Central Earth

Boyz N The Hood has serious things to say about Black men

by David Sutherland

At the core of John Singleton's *Boyz N The Hood* are some very serious thoughts concerning the present and future state of young Black men in America. Title cards preceding the film tell us that "one in seventeen Black American males will be murdered each year," and that "most will die at the hands of another Black male."

If you want more stats consider this: one quarter of African-American men in their twenties are either in jail, on parole or on probation.

These statistics are deceiving if we look at them as raw data: you must exist before the statisticians can count you. Singleton confronts this existence by crafting a fictional family drama about three young men growing up. The characters in this film are fleshed out, not mere actors on a statistical landscape.

The story begins with ten-year-old Tre Styles (Cuba Gooding Jr.) in school with some of his classmates; as they pass posters of Ronald Ray-gun they give him the finger. From our introduction to Tre we see he is intelligent, with a temper.

film
Boyz N The Hood
directed by John Singleton
starring Larry Fishburne and Cuba Gooding Jr.
released by Columbia Pictures

He lives with his mother (Angel Bassett), but after one too many fights at school she sends him to live with his father, Furious (played by Larry "Yes, I know I should play Malcolm X" Fishburne).

Singleton demonstrates his sense of cinematic irony when, as ten-year-olds, the boys go on a search for a dead body. They walk around the corner and onto the train tracks; we sense they are going on a long journey (this shot echoing a frame from the recent film *Stand By Me* in which four boys travel 60 miles to see a dead body).

They get off the tracks a few seconds later, however, and find a dead body staring them in the face. In their neighbourhood, death is just around the corner.

The story picks up seven years later, and the boys are now young men. Ricky (Morris Chestnut) is a football hero and father. His brother Doughboy, the neighbourhood drug peddler, is played by ex-N.W.A. rapper Ice Cube.



Doughboy (played by Ice Cube) is one of three close friends who grow up together in South Central Los Angeles in John Singleton's first film, *Boyz N The Hood*.

The story of Tre and the two brothers is the force that powers this film. The film contains one of the most realistic conversations about safe sex and AIDS I have ever seen. Other subjects include virginity, brotherly love, parental obligation and the effect of constant violence on people growing up. The acting is nuanced; the excellent ensemble cast led by Fishburne yields diamonds from time to time.

Fishburne's character drops some serious truths about being a man throughout the film, truths my father has often told me. Somehow they ring truer up there on the screen, thirty times the size of life.

Boyz N The Hood is an incredible first film. Singleton does not betray his age of 23. Raised in Inglewood, California, he made so many waves in film school that Creative Artists Agency signed him while he was still a student — not unprecedented, just highly unusual.

If Singleton were some Santa Monica filmmaker who had heard

about South Central L.A. from the idiot box, his film would be way off the mark. But he is not: Singleton's own experience lends this film a certain authenticity. Because this film comes from the source, it is a lot more realistic than something thrice-removed.

Too often, people look at the fictional films of Black filmmakers and perceive them as documentary, which is an error in perception. *Boyz N The Hood* is not a documentary, it is a work of fiction with its roots planted deeply in South Central Earth.

Todd Hayne's latest film is pure Poison

by Paul Gazzola

film
Poison
directed by Todd Haynes
produced with Sundance Studios

Contrary to popular belief, the "E" in NEA does not stand for Enjoyment, but Endowment, making the U. S. body's name "The National Endowment for the Arts." This important distinction probably explains why the Reverend Donald Wildmon and the American Family Association dislike the film *Poison*.

Poison — surprise, surprise — is not a family film. That's one of the reasons Wildmon is upset about the \$25,000 NEA endowment given to director/writer Todd Haynes to help finance the film. Another is Wildmon's belief that *Poison* contains "explicit porno scenes of homosexuals involved in anal sex." (There is no word whether Wildmon would've preferred explicit porno scenes of heterosexuals involved in anal sex.)

What I think really pisses the Reverend off is that he doesn't know what the hell the film is about.

Inspired by the works of Jean Genet, *Poison* features three separate but interrelated stories, all bearing simple one-word titles. "Hero," filmed as a mock documentary, gives an account of seven-year-old Richie Beacon who, according to his mother, shoots his father and disappears, flying out the window.

"Horror" is about a scientist who discovers the source of the sex drive, only to drink it by mistake. His subsequent decay is depicted in the style of a black-and-white "B" film. In "Homo," one prison inmate becomes obsessed with another, eventually raping him. Unlike Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese and Woody Allen's *New*

York Stories, Haynes does not wait until one story is completed before moving on to the next one. The three stories are intercut, becoming echoes of each other — the ticking clock heard in "Horror" represents the inevitable and violent endings of the other two stories as well.

The fate of misfits and deviants in middle class America is not, however, the sole purpose of *Poison*. In "Hero," Felicia Bacon's appraisal of her son ("He was a meek soul. People pick on meek souls.") is too simple and self-serving. With the exception of the scientist in "Horror," there are no real "meek souls" in the film. Victims and victimizers become tangled in a net of reactions; who did what to whom eventually becomes unimportant. The best the viewer can do is try to figure out who started it.

The focus of *Poison* comes at the end of "Horror." In a scene reminiscent of *Frankenstein*, Dr. Graves, now dubbed the Leper Sex-Killer, is besieged by police and an angry mob.

But the police don't ask him to surrender, nor do the townspeople attempt to burn him out. "Make yourself visible" is what is demanded of Graves. When he does, everyone shrinks back in horror and disgust.

Reverend Wildmon's criticism misses the point: *Poison* is not a film you can enjoy, because your reaction to it makes you visible. Then you have to look around and see who is watching.



John Singleton, the writer and director of the new film *Boyz N The Hood*, discusses a scene with Ice Cube (in the driver's seat) and Cuba Gooding.

Bad Blood leaves strong impression

by Azed Majeed

Blood in the Face, a new documentary by *Atomic Cafe* director Kevin Rafferty, burrows deep into the heart of hatred and evil.

While some may feel that this is familiar film territory, few films, narrative or documentary, can match this incredibly powerful — although unquestionably pedestrian — presentation of malevolence.

Rafferty, and co-producer/directors Anne Bohlen, *Village Voice*

columnist James Ridgeway and *Roger and Me* director Michael Moore, maintain an objective distance as they passively infiltrate white supremacist groups, including the Aryan Nation, the KKK, The Order and Posse Comitatus. With subject matter this potent, a clearly defined moral position seems necessary.

However, Rafferty chooses not to comment, allowing these venomous individuals to speak their minds. The film has received criticism from those who say that, without narration, it

film
Blood in the Face
directed by Kevin Rafferty
produced by Right Thinking Productions

almost becomes a recruiting film for these hate groups.

At one point in the film, Klan leader Pastor Bob Miles gives his reasons for allowing Rafferty and company to bring their cameras in, saying that although some people will disagree with what he espouses at least they will see that he and his friends have nothing to hide.

This is perhaps the only logical statement made by any member of the Party; it is also the most disturbing. Although Rafferty has shown us a part of our society we seldom get a chance to see, we cannot assume that the general response to these anomalous fringe dwellers will be one of moral indignation.

Rafferty seems to suggest that this concern for moral consensus is far more dangerous than the bile-filled rhetoric of these fundamentalists. The tendency to censor material which may be deemed socially offensive is the true target of *Blood in the Face*.

Make up your own mind about these down-to-earth bigots, but don't miss this film.



The banality of evil: neo-Nazi and other right-wing fringe groups look and sound just like the folks next door in Kevin Rafferty's documentary *Blood in the Face*.