

Philosophy, Black Film, *Film Noir*
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FIG. 1 Eunice Leonard (Theresa Harris) and her date (Caleb Peterson) warily answer the questions of private detective Jeff Markham (Robert Mitchum) (*Out of the Past*, 1947).

INTRODUCTION

philosophy and the blackness of *film noir*

The creation of film was as if meant for philosophy—meant to reorient everything philosophy has said about reality and its representation, about art and imitation, about greatness and conventionality, about judgment and pleasure, about skepticism and transcendence, about language and expression.

—Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears*

Men enjoy looking at images, because what happens is that, as they contemplate them, they apply their understanding and reasoning to each element.

—Aristotle, *Poetics*

It is knowledge itself that is dangerous in the noir world of American race relations.

—Paula Rabinowitz, *Black and White and Noir*

During the past two decades African-American and other filmmakers have refashioned the themes and techniques commonly associated with *film noir*¹ in order to redirect mainstream audience responses toward race and expose the injustices and inequities that typically frame black experience in the United States. By doing so, these filmmakers have created a new cinematic subcategory, “black *noir*.”² Many of their films offer trenchant critiques of mainstream conceptions of race by encouraging audiences to reflect on such questions as what it means to be white, what it means to be African American, what it means to be treated equally, and what it means to be acknowledged as a full-fledged human being. By eliciting such responses, these black *noir* films aim to reorient and redirect, à la Cavell, the perceptions, imaginings, and dispositions of their viewers regarding race and its relations to morality and knowledge, thereby carrying their achievement beyond merely breaking new aesthetic ground and into the realm of philosophical reflection.

Black film’s artistic development illustrates more generally how *film noir*, by virtue of its capacity to urge audiences to question the validity of assumptions

1. I have italicized “*film noir*” and “*noir*” throughout this book.

2. Ed Guerrero, “A Circus of Dreams and Lies: The Black Film Wave at Middle Age,” in *The New American Cinema*, ed. Jon Lewis (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 328–52, names some of these films “funky noir” (346), but for reasons that will become obvious, I prefer the broader term “black *noir*.” See also Guerrero’s review of *Devil in a Blue Dress*, in *Cineaste* 22, no. 1 (1996): 40.



FIG. 13 Da Mayor (Ozzie Davis) pleads with neighborhood residents to calm down, think rationally, and act accordingly (*Do the Right Thing*, 1989).

riot. Because he is a figure whose character we know about as well as anyone's in the narrative, audience members have the materials necessary to grasp why he might finally break down, morally speaking, and express his anger and frustration in the form of initiating the destruction of Sal's property. Outraged by Raheem's death and his boss's moral insensitivity, Mookie reaches his limit regarding his capacity to remain patient and negotiate the racial and other pressures ceaselessly imposed on him. On the other hand, the narrative is explicit in not endorsing Mookie's action. For example, Da Mayor repeatedly urges everyone (including Mookie) to remain calm and not act out of anger or frustration in response to Raheem's death and Sal's morally obtuse response to it. If anything, Da Mayor acts as the voice of reason at this point in the film.⁵⁶ "If we don't stop this and stop it now," he tells those gathering around the pizzeria, "we gonna do something that we gonna regret for the rest of our lives." Furthermore, Da Mayor cries "Noooo!" in response to Mookie's shout of "HATE!" as he hurls the garbage can through Sal's windowfront. Mookie's exclamation clearly alludes back to Raheem's story about good and evil and explicitly indicates that evil has won out, in direct contradiction to both Da Mayor and Raheem's moral philosophies.

The narrative makes redundantly clear that Mookie is doing the *wrong* thing, even while striving to make redundantly clear *why* he is doing it: he has just seen his friend murdered by the police and heard Sal falsely deny any sort of complicity in the matter. In fact, Sal has characterized his own actions as

56. This claim is made by Lee himself in his commentary on the scene: he defends Da Mayor as not being an "Uncle Tom," but as voicing reason (*Do the Right Thing*, DVD).



FIG. 14 Mookie (Spike Lee) agonizing over what to do (*Do the Right Thing*, 1989).

just and appropriate, when clearly they were not. As I argued in the previous chapter, Sal's response shows no real understanding of the fact that what has just taken place has a deeply racialized meaning. Raheem's murder evokes a moral outrage in neighborhood residents because they know that they too could suffer racial injustice at any time. Lee flags these features in his narrative by making explicit reference to them in what his African-American characters say and do, as well as in how iconographically Sal and his sons are often isolated in opposition to the other community members. Thus when viewers see Mookie visibly agonizing over the conflicting pressures bearing down on him, as they do in a medium shot inserted into the crowd scenes just prior to the riot, it should be readily discernible why Mookie acts as he does—why he strides resolutely over to the trash can, empties it, carries it over to Sal's, and hurls it through the glass front of the pizzeria.

This is not to say, however, that such a realization need be immediate. Like many *noir* characters, Mookie's decision here may well trouble us long after the film is over. We may only come to grasp his decision after reflecting on it at length. Yet this aspect of encouraging us to reflect on dilemmas faced by morally ambiguous characters and the decisions they make regarding them are aspects common to many *noirs*, from *The Maltese Falcon* to *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2001).

Mookie initiates the riot, even though it is precisely the wrong thing to do, because he is expressing his outrage at Raheem's racially unjust death and Sal's inability to admit any complicity. Even though Mookie's act is morally wrong and the film marks it as so, the depiction of the film's events, situations, and the characters involved provide abundant evidence to explain why Mookie acts as he does. Of course, in the absence of empathy for Lee's African-American

OTHER FORMS OF BLACKNESS



The flourishing of any given person's humanity requires its acknowledgement by her others.

—Stephen Mulhall, *On Film*

By presenting still more striking, innovative occasions for viewers to consider what it means to fully acknowledge another, African-American and other filmmakers have pushed black *noir* into new regions of aesthetic advance, for these innovations have incorporated into the film form an interrogation of presuppositions concerning additional forms of social disadvantage that operate in concert with race. Accordingly, I argue that the films I examine in this chapter illustrate Mulhall's link between acknowledgment and flourishing, and the relation of these ideas to justice, for where injustice exists, these components of a decent human life will be distorted or absent as well.¹ For example, female gothic *noir* characteristics structure Kasi Lemmons's *Eve's Bayou* (1997), thereby bringing into focus concerns of African-American women, something often absent from earlier black *noirs*. Its narrative calls for viewers to reflect on conceptions of memory, reality, and self from a raced as well as a gendered perspective, thus bringing into view a whole range of humanity that is inadequately understood by many viewers. Likewise, *noir*-influenced films such as the film version of Walter Mosley's *Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned* (1998), Antoine Fuqua's *Training Day* (2001), and Lemmons's second feature film, *The Caveman's Valentine* (2001), prompt extended audience reflection about the humanity of otherwise negatively stereotyped black figures, namely, ex-cons, corrupt cops, and mentally ill homeless persons, thereby formally expanding black *noir*'s range to the consideration of presumptions regarding other types of socially oppressed human beings besides black youth and adult men.

A crucial point I wish to make in this chapter and the next is that African-American *film noir* has not only continued to progress and develop but matured as a set of techniques for appealing to audiences to think reflectively about the troubling interdependencies of morality, justice, and social oppression. Its ongoing development may be attributed to how black *noir* possesses capacities to depict and dissect evolving forms of the racial contract as well as the diverse and bacteria-like forms of social domination in general. Like its *noir* predecessors, these black *noirs* trouble us about injustices and moral inequities long after the film stock (or its equivalent) has stopped rolling by utilizing *noir*'s

special aptitudes for critically representing social oppression and eliciting serious reflective thought concerning previously hidden presuppositions about human beings and the moral relations between them.

These films accomplish much of what I analyze here by extending *noir*'s potential for encouraging sympathetic and empathetic understanding for other types of Cavellian individualities—that is, kinds of characters that certain people are, such that we could imagine ourselves having met them or meeting them in other circumstances—thereby expanding viewers' imaginations regarding what a full-fledged sense of humanity involves.² To elicit acknowledgment and recognition of normally stereotypical characters as the fictional equivalent of full-fledged human beings, these films exploit *noir*'s capacity to prompt such responses, particularly by means of empathetic understanding. Taking as my point of departure Mulhall's argument concerning how *Blade Runner* encourages empathetic responses to its replicant characters, I maintain that, by depicting vulnerability, pain, or suffering as peculiarly human, these *noir* films motivate viewers to incorporate previously "othered" individualities into their sense of the human, prompting a growth in moral imagination.³ But prior to addressing this issue, I consider another dimension of viewer asymmetry with regard to race, namely what it might mean for a film to be "universally accessible."

Eve's Bayou and Its Critical Reception

When writer/director Kasi Lemmons released her first feature film, critic Andrew Sarris wrote, "To hail Ms. Lemmons' *Eve's Bayou* as the best African-American film ever, as one may be understandably inclined to do, would be to understate its universal accessibility to anyone on the planet with the slightest involvement in the painful experience of family life."⁴ Other critics praised the film in similar ways.⁵ While in one sense surely appreciated, in another this form of backhanded praise was bizarre, for as film studies scholar Mia L. Mask notes, such remarks betray a real reluctance to describe and admire a film as an outstanding work of art by and about African Americans.⁶ I would further argue that this form of praise is particularly odd, given that *Eve's Bayou* tells a story that contains *only* African-American characters. Thus it would seem to border on the perverse to downplay or ignore the fact that the film takes place entirely within the milieu of an all-black enclave in the United States—specifically, in a town that "was named after a slave" and

2. Cavell, *World Viewed*, 29, 33, 35.

3. Mulhall, *On Film*, 33–51.

4. Andrew Sarris, "A 10-Year-Old Murderer Propels a Nerve Debut Film" (review of *Eve's Bayou*), *New York Observer*, November 17, 1997, 37.

5. See, for example, Cynthia Joyce, "Eve Gets Even," *Salon*, November 7, 1997, <http://archive.salon.com/ent/movies/1997/11/07eve.html>, and Louis B. Parks, "Jackson Takes a Detour to the 'Bayou,'" *Houston Chronicle*, November 8, 1997, Houston Section, p. 1.

6. Mia L. Mask, "Eve's Bayou: Too Good to Be a 'Black' Film?" *Cineaste* 23, no. 4 (1998): 27.

1. Mulhall, *On Film*, 35.