Training Day: The Anti-Buddy Cop Film Phenomenon

It's 1966. A red train pulls up to a busy platform in Sparta, Mississippi. Men and women exit from the train with the help of the conductor. The oppressive heat of the South gives everyone a shine and deliberate nature to their pace. A white man, Chief of Police Bill Gillespie (Rod Steiger) and a black man, officer Virgil Tibbs (Sidney Poitier) walk up to the platform and exchange glances. Gillespie asks Tibbs if he has a ticket, shakes his hand, thanks him and then says, "Bye-bye," as he walks away from the platform. Tibbs pauses, and starts up the platform. "Virgil!" Gillespie calls out, somewhat surprising himself as the words exit his mouth. Tibbs stops on the stairs and turns around. Both men look at each other. "You take care y'hear?" says Gillespie. Tibbs' surprised face grows into a smile, "Yeah." he responds. Gillespie just smiles back wider, smacking his trademark gum in between his lips. Tibbs steps aboard the train, headed back home. Both men it *seems* changed for the better, as the Hollywood train chugs farther and farther away...

This is the scene that ends Norman Jewison's 1967 film *In The Heat of The Night.* This film, which is a product of the Civil Rights era, will serve as our springboard to our discussion of biracial buddy-cop films. *In The Heat of The Night* exemplifies and (possibly started) one of the key tropes of this genre: racial reconciliation. An idea that cops from different backgrounds shall be unified in a wholesome yet often expedited way by the end of the movie. [1]As the groundbreaking author James Baldwin said when referencing this finale scene in his novel "The Fire Next Time": "nothing, alas, has been made possible…except that white Americans have been encouraged to continue dreaming" (58-59). In other words,

[1] To be clear this essay is not concerned (or not significantly concerned) with the filmmakers intention, but more so between racial dynamics on screen versus racial dynamics in life.

this film is an extension of a fantasy that America enjoys telling itself. The reconciliation here is a self-gratifying "we fixed it" treatment and metaphor for larger social issues at play. Gillespie, who starts out as an alcoholic brute in an understaffed office, skeptical and upset at the presence of this dark-skinned man in his small town, suddenly has a better outlook and diminished prejudice in the short course of the case/film. Gillespie joins a pantheon of lawmen who are meant to complete the character arch of a lifetime in order to fulfill a fantasy transition -- one that the white audience should ideally live vicariously through.

In the story of the film, Gillespie, first points to Tibbs as a suspect in a murder, when he is really just a man in the wrong place at the wrong time (or so it seems). Eventually when Gillespie realizes that Tibbs is a well-respected homicide expert, he starts to give him some more leeway. He realizes that they are working towards the same goal, and that he might have something to gain if he just keeps his mouth shut when Tibbs is talking.

In The Heat of The Night was a revolutionary film, and it's ideas of racial reconciliation and unity permeate many biracial buddy-cop films to follow, such as *Rush Hour* (Brett Ratner, 1998) *48 Hrs* (Walter Hill, 1982)*, Blazing Saddles* (Mel Brooks, 1974) and others. This paper seeks to deal with what happens when the wholesome gesture of reconciliation is bypassed completely. We will explore how a film can be labeled a buddy-cop film by mass audiences and critics yet still subvert many key tropes of the genre. The phenomenon that completes this tricky and rare task we shall title the *anti-buddy cop film* -- a film like this is still so unique that it is not worth yet calling a genre but only a phenomenon. *Training Day* (Fuqua 2001) is the prime example of this phenomenon.

Although *Training Day* is an iconic film that appears on many publications' lists as one of the 'best buddy-cop films' of all time (The Playlist, Esquire) it in fact lies just outside the genre bubble altogether. The traditional type of buddy-cop film has a long history, owing it's debt to films like *In The Heat of the Night* as well as the bold, farcical comedy *Blazing Saddles*. **The construction of these films often follow a similar standardized sequence:**

1), a case or crisis (in a town too small or a town too big to handle it), then a cop who is stumped by how to deal with the issue, next, by chance or desperation another officer comes in to help, almost always being the black officer who is either a) underrated and/or underqualified (i.e. Tommy Lee Jones in *No Country for Old Men)* or b) on-his-way out (retiring) or c) a criminal of sorts (i.e. *Zootopia, 48 Hrs.)*;

2) unlikely pair must reconcile their racial prejudice (or in more contemporary films, simply their cultural misunderstandings or slip ups) in pursuit of one common goal: bringing the criminals to light, *justice for all* (which often includes a promotion within the department for one or both of the cops).

Often these films simplify or expedite how prejudice is extinguished from an individual for vicarious pleasure. The white cop (or almost universally, the racist cop, i.e. *Bright* with Will Smith) almost must give up his racism in the face of justice. He fights this "giving up" like he is detoxing from a drug, and rejects working with the other cop, until he

eventually accepts his duty, and becomes a changed man. This type of character change usually happens over the course of one 'hell-of-a-day/week' but almost always no longer (unless it is stretched out for a TV series) .

Training Day bypasses this notion that prejudice can be rung out so expeditiously. In fact, in this film the prejudice and the power structure we are accustomed to seeing is flipped from the jump. Detective Alonzo Harris (Denzel Washington) must spend a day on patrol with a white rookie officer, Jake Hoyt (Ethan Hawke). Here, Alonzo is essentially auditioning him for his team, and his ethics, although twisted are established as firm. Jake comes to understand that this is an opportunity to be a part of an exclusive, hyper-masculine team so he tries to go along with the insanity for a while. Alonzo is in the position of power here which is a clear subversion of the classic structure. In *Training Day* the black cop for once is now letting the white cop into his world, instead of vice versa.

A second reversal takes place in this film as well: a white officer is no longer skeptical of a black officer's authority and identity; [2] instead, Alonzo, a black officer is the skeptical of the white rookie officer, Jake. Carole Viola Bell gives a nice framework in her paper, "Women, Film and Racial Thinking" for the typical loophole used to allow racial diversity onto the big screen, "...a black co-star is integrated into the white middle class and helps the white lead defeat usually ethnic evildoers... that threaten their way of life." (Belle 2010) A typical buddy cop film follows a version of this: a black man is plucked from his surroundings only to eventually interrogate members of his own race (sometimes even his friends, family, community) before capturing the suspect (i.e. *48 Hrs.*). The position of

[2] This is a skepticism that the audience is expected (or has largely been expected) to share This does not assume that the viewer is racist, but it does assume that the viewer is white, and are needing some space to adjust to the officer dynamic through a 'skeptical hero'.

power the secondary cop wields must be re-affirmed through this constant acknowledgement of their upbringing and background.[3]

To rework the loophole presented by Bell for *Training Day* might look something like this: "...a white co-star is integrated into the urban crime culture and helps the urban community defeat the lead "ethnic evildoer" that threatens their way of life." However wonky this reworking sounds it shows that clearly there has been a deliberate inverting of tropes in the process of structuring this film. Despite his department accolades, Alonzo Harris uses his power within the Los Angeles Police Department to consciously fight against his own community, rather than "learn something" or "rehabilitate" himself, which is the trajectory most ethnic co-stars are affixed to. An example of this type of turning on his community is when Alonzo uses a fake search warrant to steal $40,000 from a high ranking drug dealer, the "Sandman". He does this in front of the Sandman's wife and child in the drug dealer's home and when she realizes what has occurred, she encourages her black neighbors to engage in a shootout with Alonzo as their target, before he gets away with Jake in their undercover car, narrowly avoiding a hail of bullets. Rather than live life as a full blown criminal, Alonzo has chosen to hid his actions under the guise of the badge -- gaining him a reputation as two-faced and dangerous.

Any minority person in a buddy cop film, (dare I say minority person in real life), who joins the police force, faces a flurry of contradictions in their job. Noble intentions aside they are gatekeepers to the prison-industrial complex, one that disproportionately

[3] *Hell or High Water* is another example of a film whose buddy cop dynamic is built off of frequent racial slurs between the two Texas Rangers who are on the hunt for the bank-robbing Howard brothers. This film could be another contender for an anti-buddy cop film in how the Native American cop dies before the other retiring ranger (Jeff Bridges) reveals his respect for him, leaving us empty of any moral or racial reconciliation.

targets minorities, and is motivated more by government legislature, business interests and prison quotas than rehabilitative needs for the individual. This is all well-documented. Alonzo, as a gatekeeper, choses to exert his power by probing his community rather than uplifting them or protecting them, like most black men or minority cops in buddy cop films. He uses the nuances of his community and their culture to undermine and detain them. Since Alonzo cannot change his blackness, he simultaneously retains his membership and authority within the black community, while abusing it at each step of the way. The facilitation of an oscillating authority, and a dual citizenship, presents itself in many biracial buddy-cop films like *In The Heat of The Night* and *48 Hrs* -- but this is one of the only films I know of where this authority is used for greed rather than good.

As much as dual citizenship is used by Alonzo, it is also put into question. For instance when Alonzo walks into a largely African American gang territory in South Central L.A., called "The Jungle" he is greeted with appreciation by the first man he walks up to, "Bones," while a few gang members play craps on the sidewalk. Yet as soon as Alonzo exits, Bones says: "I can't stand that motherfucker." In Alonzo's eyes personal view, it seems that he lies somewhere between a Robin Hood character and an early mafioso; he is the debt collector and favor-doer that you don't want to fuck with -- but he makes you feel like his services (whatever they are) are necessary. Any animosity his community feels towards him he seems unaware of due to his own hubris.

In the film we assume this status is gained by rescuing people from indictment or by putting in a "good word" for them to his friends at the LAPD, but this is never actually elaborated on or justified. His "golden pass" in the neighborhood (which is real life ghetto

Baldwin Hills) is explained by Alonzo: "'Cause I treat 'em fair, they know if they cross the line I'm taxing that ass." The 'line' it appears for Alonzo, may be so tight that his own community is likely to turn against him at any moment -- which in the end they do.

Comparing this oscillating authority with films like *In The Heat of The Night*, we see a stark difference in how this citizenship is used. When Tibbs follows up a lead towards the end of the film, he ends up at Mrs. Bellamy's house, also known as Mama. She is the local abortionist, who might solve the connection between a woman, Dolores Purdy, and the identity of the murderer. At first, Mama does not trust Tibbs, and wonders why he is working for "Mr. Charlie" (a pejorative used within the African-American community to refer to an overbearing white man). She and Tibbs engage in a discussion, where he warns her that "colored jail" is the worst kind of jail. Yet, shortly after when Mama realizes she may know some valuable information she tells him, "I got used to better, you won't take it away?" Tibbs responds, "I won't." This verification that she will be protected for giving out information on the killer's identity, as well as not being arrested for giving out illegal abortions outside the hospital, shows that Tibbs respects his relationship his own people, African-American community. He may interrogate them, but only when appropriate to the case. Questioning suspects without any respect or tact is partly what classifies Alonzo as a member of the anti-buddy cop film, rather than a member of the buddy-cop genre.

In outlining the dichotomy between the classic biracial buddy cop genre and the anti biracial buddy-cop, there is another trope worth noting: the "big bust." This is often the inciting incident that unifies the two cops. A crime has been committed the that is out of the hands of the available law enforcement. Whether it takes the form of an escaped prisoner on

a killing spree in *48 Hrs*, or the mysterious death of a well-to-do industrialist in *In The Heat of The Night*, this facet of the plot almost universally underscores this genre. In *Training Day,* however, this idea is cleverly subverted. Jake is out training with Alonzo to be part of the narcotics team, so the cases that he assists in, (although they may be the tip of the iceberg for something bigger) are often either petty crimes or personal vendettas enacted by Alonzo and his goons. All of which prove to be distractions to the real big bust which lies with Alonzo. [4]

Alonzo, the decorated detective has made enemies with the Russians during a gambling fiasco, (an event we only hear about and never see), a move so dangerous even his fellow officers and lawyers who also seem corrupted are shocked by. Alonzo it seems has found himself in way over his head. By displaying hubris and staying in the US in order to pay off the Russians, he digs his own grave. Jake, in effect at the end of the film doesn't run away from an explosion and grand finale that unifies him with his partner as flames map the sky, but quite the opposite: Jake runs away from the death and explosion of Alonzo's world, separating the path of the two men.

The trope of two cops coming together from different backgrounds to unite against a larger evil, remains unfulfilled, since the "evil," it turns out, was personified within Alonzo himself. The use of buddy-cop films as a vehicle for a larger metaphor about racial unity is shattered by the finale of the film where Alonzo is gunned down by the russians and Jake goes back home after one of the worst ride-alongs you could imagine. *Training Day* takes away the fantasy of racial unity, for a larger message about the irreversible chasms

[4] The big bust is also not the $3 million drug bust that Alonzo pulls from his friend's living room floor (a friend who is an ex-cop) which turns out to be a clear exploitation of his aging friend. This scene is pivotal though in that Jake passes on taking any money from the bust.

corruption can place you into, no matter your race, authority etc. The feeling of having wiped your hands clean of a big case is bypassed and we as an audience sympathize with Jake Hoyt, because his attempts to thwart Alonzo's dealings with the Russians, prevents future mayhem from unfolding. The character arc that Alonzo completes is not positive or prejudice diffusing; instead he watches his empire and his misdoings collapse upon him . It should also be said that although Alonzo is an African-American man who is violent and unpredictable he is clearly an outlier to his own African American community because of these aspects of his personality. This element helps the story avoid dramatizing stereotypes of black men, crime and masculinity for the sake of sheer entertainment -- which a rare feat for a big budget Hollywood film. [5]

By adopting classic tropes of a biracial buddy cop film and subverting them, *Training Day* masks its highly subversive film as a standard buddy-cop piece while innovating the genre. One of the phenomenons and themes at work in this film is that institutional corruption and malice is "colorblind" and ubiquitous in who it affects. Whether in Alonzo's racially diverse narcotics team, the Mexican gang that almost kills Jakes, or in the white judges and cops who talk shop at the restaurant. Anybody who is tempted enough by the glimmer and reward corruption and malice offer can be contaminated. Alonzo, at the end of the day, was just a man who was contaminated more than most.

[5] Alonzo, unlike Tibbs, is not interested in discovering the truth of a crime for the betterment and protection of his people, but just for the rewards inside of that crime. He is not the voice of his people, as he believes. He does what is illegal for the thrill of it, and personal greed rather for a quick, necessary hustle to survive. This dichotomy is what many...of the men in The Jungle seem to recognize and shun Alonzo for. He is not their advocate, like Tibbs who seeks to arrest a racist cotton field owner and protect Mama; on the contrary, he is actually their adversary, ready to die for his own ruthless principles.

Filmography

1.) Hill, Walter, director. *In the Heat of the Night*. MGM, 1967.

2.) Fuqua, Antoine, director. *Training Day*. Warner Bros, 2001

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