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Why Can't We Be Friends: The Legitimization of Police Violence in the Buddy-cop Film Genre

Briah Baker
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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WHY CAN'T WE BE FRIENDS: THE LEGITIMIZATION OF POLICE VIOLENCE IN THE
BUDDY-COP FILM GENRE

by
Briah Baker

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

WHY CAN'T WE BE FRIENDS: THE LEGITIMIZATION OF POLICE VIOLENCE IN THE BUDDY-COP FILM GENRE

by

Briah Baker

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, August 2021

Under the Supervision of Professor Richard Popp

This study investigates the legitimization of police violence through the use of humor in the buddy-cop-action-comedy film. Following the development of the judicial system and federal, local, and state governments in the militarization of urban police forces between the 1960s and the early 2000s in the U.S. in order to present a picture of how the buddy-cop film genre grew in popularity over the course of the 1980s and onwards. Through an industrial and contextual analysis of two buddy-cop films that attempt to ‘subvert’ the traditional tropes of a buddy-cop film by casting two Black actors in *Bad Boys II* (2003) and casting two white actresses in *The Heat* (2013). This study concludes that because police violence is the predominant source of humor in the buddy-cop genre, on-screen diversity, is not enough to remove the legitimization of police violence from the genre.

Keywords: buddy-cop, police brutality, black police officers, female police officers, action-comedy

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To
My parents,
My friends,
My colleagues and professors,

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT	1
Introduction	1
Purpose of the Study	2
Theoretical Framework	2
Literature Review	6
Making a Hyper-Violent and Hyper-Masculine Genre	6
Making a Militarized and Hyper-Aggressive Force	12
Methodology	16
Thesis Chapter Structure	19
CHAPTER TWO: THE DEVELOPMENT OF U.S. LAW ENFORCEMENT AND A BRIEF HISTORY OF CRIMINAL FICTION	20
Introduction	20
Shaping the Public's Opinion	20
Tale of Two Coasts	23
The Buddy-Cop as a Film Genre	33
Lethal Weapon's	38
CHAPTER THREE: <i>BAD BOYS II</i> INDUSTRIAL AND TEXTUAL ANALYSIS	49
The Rise of <i>Bad Boys</i>	49
Being Buddies and <i>Bad Boys</i>	53
Before <i>Bad Boys</i>	55
Being <i>Bad Boys</i>	61
Conclusion	69
CHAPTER FOUR: <i>THE HEAT</i> INDUSTRIAL AND TEXTUAL ANALYSIS	73
<i>Bridesmaids</i> Walked Down the Aisle So They Could Bring <i>The Heat</i>	73
Female Friendships that have <i>The Heat</i>	78
Throughout History Female Officers Have Brought <i>The Heat</i>	79
Action Heroines and <i>The Heat</i> They Bring On-Screen	82
'We're <i>The Heat</i> ': Character Introductions	85
'We're <i>The Heat</i> ': Police Work	89
The Acceptance and Rejection of Neoliberal Feminism in <i>The Heat</i>	93

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION.....	98
Bringing <i>Bad Boys II</i> and <i>The Heat</i> to Conclusion.....	98
Solutions	100
Broader Implications.....	101
BIBLIOGRAPHY	104

CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

INTRODUCTION

Detective Mullins apprehends a white male john who is picking up a sex worker on the street. A tense back and forth proceeds between the two leading her to arrest the john. A scene later is when the real action takes place that introduces the audience to Detective Mullins' surly no-nonsense attitude. Mullins pulls her personal vehicle, that she uses to arrest suspects, in front of a group of Black and Latinx men, who appear to be gang members based off of their attire. Just like before with the john, Mullins begins a back and forth with the suspect who is a Black drug dealer. Mullins identifies the suspect to be smoking an illegal substance and proceeds to chase the suspect with her car as he runs away on foot. The john, in the backseat of the car, screams in terror as Mullins drives brazenly through side streets chasing the suspect. Mullins comes to a stop and chases after the suspect on foot and eventually apprehends her suspect. She calls the suspect a "piece of shit" and a "son of bitch" multiple times as she arrests him. This is the opening scene of *The Heat*, a 2010s twist on the buddy-cop genre.

I consider myself a fan of the buddy-cop-action film genre, I greatly enjoy films that mix my two favorite genres together: action and comedy. I love the witty banter, the over the top stunts, and the fast pace action that are hallmarks of the genre. What I have grown to not love about these films is the hyper-masculine and hyper-aggressive policing tactics displayed by the lead characters. As the #BlackLivesMatter movement has come to life before American's and the world's eyes, my attention was drawn to fictional media and the role it plays in presenting and perpetuating dominant ideologies about the police for audiences. This interest led me to focus this thesis on two films, *The Heat* (2013) and *Bad Boys II* (2003). I consider these films to be an interesting reflection on how buddy-cop films can mirror the cases of police harassment and the gradual militarization of the American police force that audiences have seen occur in real life.

Scenes such as the opening moments of *The Heat* are played for laughs due to the incredulity and ridiculousness of the moment, but they can also be depictions of the ‘maverick’ police officer, who has zero regard for civil liberties. My thesis is a study of how *The Heat* and *Bad Boys II* tend to complicate the typical dynamics and beats that audiences have come to be familiar with in the buddy-cop-film genre. *The Heat* and *Bad Boys II* follow traditional beats of buddy-cop films, while also subverting aspects of the genre via gender and race.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is not to blame fictional media for the militarization of American law enforcement. But I will explore how policing tactics are reflected in popular film and further perpetuate the dominant fiction that the police are enforcers of justice within American neighborhoods. This thesis fills a gap in the literature that has failed to consider the role of fictional media in the furthering of dominant ideology about police aggression in the U.S. I explore these instances by working in the tradition of encoding/decoding model and cultivation analysis. This study has only become more relevant over the past decade as the prevalence of videos showcasing brutal policing throughout the country go viral on social media and cable news on a seemingly regular basis. These videos have produced discussion about how police treat members of the communities they are supposed to protect.

Theoretical Framework

Mass media and cultural studies has a rich tradition of researching and hypothesizing about the role of violence in media and how violence can legitimize gender, racial, and economic dynamics in society. I have drawn on one methodological and one theoretical framework from mass media and cultural studies respectively, in order to assist my research about how humorous violence in buddy-cop-action-comedies can mirror and in turn legitimize police brutality cases in real life. The traditions that I am working under is cultural studies’

encoding/decoding model and mass communication's cultivation analysis. Encoding/decoding is Stuart Hall's cultural studies model which showcases how audiences make meaning of the images that are presented to them via media texts. Encoding is when broadcasters input a "meaningful discourse" into a television program.¹ This can be achieved through sound design, plot, costuming, etc. The decoding takes place on the audience's end of the model where the audience interprets the message that was encoded into the program. The message then becomes a part of a larger structure and thus the model begins again.² Hall notes that audiences can extract multiple meanings from media; media is polysemic.³

I am using the encoding/decoding model because Hall explains how dominant ideology does not merely reproduce violent images for audiences but sends messages *about* violence to audiences.⁴ Hall explores how actions and dialogue can create expectations surrounding a character's personality, showing an audience how a particular person can react to violence in a given scenario. I am using the encoding/decoding model because the model accounts for violence being genre dependent. Hall mentions throughout "Television Discourse" that there are "codes" that must be followed within genres. As he writes:

"This reciprocity of codes is, indeed, precisely what is entailed in the notion of stylization or "conventionalization", and the presence of such reciprocal codes is, of course, what defines or makes possible the existence of a genre."⁵ In seeing how characters' use

¹ Hall, Stuart. "Encoding and decoding in the television discourse." (paper presented at the Council of Europe Colloquy on "Training in the Critical Reading of Television Language", Leicester, United Kingdom, September, 1973), 3.

² Ibid 1.

³ Ibid 1, 9.

⁴ Ibid 1, 8.

⁵ Ibid 1, 6.

violence, audiences are shown how violence is used to maintain particular forms of social order.

As Hall writes:

“The “‘message’” or the “‘proposition,’” now, would be understood, not as a message about ‘violence’ but as a message about conduct, or even about professionalism, or perhaps even about the relation of professionalism to character.”⁶

The encoded message is not just about action, but it is about telling audiences what the character is like and how the character fits within the conventions of the genre. If the genre is already understood, the motives and actions of the character are somewhat easier to decode. Hall’s understanding of genre, the role of violence in character development, and the attention to the production process are why the encoding/decoding model compliment cultivation analysis for my project.

My analysis is also influenced by research that became influential in mass communications in the 1970s due to a desire to understand the effects of extended television viewing on audiences. Cultivation analysis is a mass media effects methodology coined by George Gerbner and Larry Gross in 1977. Cultivation analysis is “determining the conceptions of social reality that television tends to cultivate in different groups of child and adult viewers.”⁷ Factors such as age, education, occupation, etc. can also influence the likelihood that the extended viewing of television will alter a person’s sense of violence in real life. Though Gerbner, et al., admit that television’s influence can be seen as independent, complementary, or

⁶ Ibid 1, 10.

⁷ George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Nancy Signorielli, and Marilyn Jackson-Beeck. “Cultural Indicators: A Prospectus and Proposal for the Extension and Diversification of the Research Project on Trends in Television Content and Viewer Conceptions of Social Reality.” The Annenberg School of Communication. 1977. 2-13.

contrary to extraneous social variables, suggesting, that it is not just extended viewing of television that can alter a person's perception of reality.⁸ Rather it is a combination of multiple factors in conjunction with extended viewing of television that can alter a viewer's perception of reality.

I am performing a qualitative textual analysis of two comedic films as opposed to multiple hours of television. What I draw from cultivation analysis is how it frames how violence is used in the media to inform audiences of power dynamics and social order. I am not interested in trying to understand how audiences interpret the violence that appears in buddy-cop films, rather I am interested in researching how the films legitimize, reproduce, and enforce dominant ideologies about policing in the United States. As Gerbner, et al., write:

“All societies have ways of explaining the world to themselves and to their children.

Socially constructed “reality” gives a coherent picture of what exists, what is important, how things are related, and what is right.”⁹

Cultivation analysis's basis is in the medium of television but I transfer the theory onto the medium of film. Over the past twenty years, the lines between television and film have not been as stark as they used to be. Films have gone onto live second lives, airing in syndication on cable television channels and streaming services, thus marrying the two mediums together. *The Heat* and *Bad Boys II* remain accessible through these mediums years after their initial film release dates.

⁸ Ibid 6, 5.

⁹ George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Nancy Signorielli, Michael Morgan, and Marilyn Jackson-Beeck. “The Demonstration of Power: Violence Profile No. 10.” The Annenberg School of Communication. 1978. 179-180.

Literature Review

My literature review covers two bodies of literature. The first half covers research found in the fields of film and media studies that focus on defining and understanding the genre of the buddy cop action-comedy. I explore how previous studies explain how gender, race, and humor and violence in fictional media are used to reinforce dominant ideologies of police aggression in everyday life. The second half consists of recent work covering the historical and sociological origins of the carceral and contemporary criminal justice and law enforcement practices in the U.S. This is key to understanding how contemporary policing practices and technology became institutionalized across police forces. The section will cover the periods between the late 1960s and the 1990s. In the second chapter of the thesis I connect these details together to track how the buddy-cop genre developed in parallel to the gradual militarization of U.S. police forces in greater detail.

Making a Hyper-Violent and Hyper-Masculine Genre

Comedy and action films are each individual categories of films. Action-comedy films come together to create a separate category of films. The action-comedy relies on the witty comebacks and snappy one-liners of the characters in the film to cut the tension in violent scenes.¹⁰ Police films are the larger genre of films with a sub-genre of films consisting of comedies, dramas, and thrillers. Police films follow police officers or federal agents investigating cases or dealing with interpersonal conflicts in their lives that relate to their occupation as a police officer. A buddy-cop film is a sub-genre of the police film genre. Buddy-cop films usually

¹⁰ Lauritsen, Silas. "The relation between humor and violence within a theoretical frame in regards to Tarantino's Films." 3

follow two police officers or federal agents who clash, mainly in personality and attitude towards their policing work.

Comedy is a somewhat complicated genre because it is reliant on audience reaction and interpretation of what plays out on screen. It requires multi-perspective storytelling according, to humor scholar Johan Morrahl, as he writes, “To get even simple jokes requires that we have two interpretations for a phrase in mind at the same time.”¹¹ Storytelling becomes a bit more complicated when violence is introduced into the genre. In action-comedy films the humor can be used to release the tension of the violent images that appear onscreen.¹² Humor in action-comedy films is usually used to undercut the violent and aggressive actions that are taking place within the film. Humor as a genre, is quite revealing, it can showcase what a society deems as frivolous. Cultural studies theorist Henry Giroux, states how violence in film can often,

“be used to probe the depths of everyday life in ways that expand one’s understanding of tyranny and domination; it can also be used to maximize the sleazy side of pleasure, reinforce demeaning stereotypes, or provoke cheap voyeurism.”¹³

Humor is revealing of what a society views as amusing and what should and should not be taken seriously. When violence is introduced into humorous situations messages can be encoded into the film that reveal quite a lot about society. According to Giroux there are three different types of violence that appear in film: symbolic, hyperreal, and ritualistic. The type of violence that appears most frequently in action-comedy films, and therefore the buddy-cop-

¹¹ Morrahl, John. “The Aesthetics of Humor” from *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2009. 80

¹² Heil, Susan Kay Romoser. “Does humor mediate the effects of film violence? Affective consequences of viewing the violent action comedy.” Kansas State University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2001. 4.

¹³ Giroux, Henry. “Racism and the Aesthetic of Hyperreal Violence: Pulp Fiction and Other Visual Tragedies.” *Social Identities* Vol.1 No. 2 (1995), pp. 333-354.

action-comedy, is ritualistic violence. This type of violence is superficial, campy, self-indulgent, and “masturbatory.”¹⁴ Giroux further notes how violence is also racialized, writing that, “representations of violence are largely portrayed through forms of racial coding that suggests that violence is a black problem.”¹⁵ Black men often appear disproportionately caught in violent acts in film, thus indicting an entire group of people for violent acts.¹⁶ Ritualistic violence in combination with comedic scenes creates a justification for violent acts that can lead to Americans feeling comfortable with witnessing violent acts against Black Americans. The violence often appears in buddy-cop films against certain groups specifically and often the violence is framed in a humorous way.

Cop films have been around since the early 20th century, though at the time they were considered to be detective films, following sleuths, such as Sherlock Holmes in films like *The Speckled Band* (1931). The detective archetype would later morph into the police officer during the rise of long-form films. The 1970s is when the hyper-masculine action oriented buddy film appeared in Hollywood. Originally, the genre consisted of white men in dramatic films, such as *Easy Rider* (1969). Women were largely absent from the films and people of color were usually relegated to stereotypical villainous roles. Ed Guerrero states that, these films were popularized in response to the social gains made by marginalized groups in the civil rights and women’s liberation movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹⁷ The films somewhat declined in the mid to late 1970s but arose again in the 1980s. A transformation took place in the genre in the

¹⁴ Ibid 13.

¹⁵ Ibid 13.

¹⁶ Ibid 13

¹⁷ Guerrero, Ed. “Chapter 15: The Black Image in Protective Custody: Hollywood’s Biracial Buddy Films of the Eighties.” From *Black American Cinema*. Routledge: New York and London. 1993. 239.

1980s, during the turn towards conservatism under the Regan presidential era. The pair of men were no longer outlaws, but police officers, and the pair was no longer strictly two white men, instead a Black police officer and a white police officer. The tone of the films was no longer an action thriller, but a light-hearted comedy.

The 1980's interracial buddy-cop film usually featured two opposing personality types. The white man is usually a no-nonsense, emotionally grizzled, hyper-aggressive law enforcement officer. That officer is paired with a Black person, who at times is a civilian a la *48hrs* (1982), or a police officer. The Black man usually appears to only exist as comedic relief and is less intimidating, in personality and professional charisma, than his white partner. In terms of outside relationships, the Black officer may have a wife and children, while the white partner has no family and is usually depicted as a womanizer. These films feature officers in difficult situations where they have to depend on each other and solve their interpersonal conflicts in order to resolve the central conflict of the film. The films tend to exclude the Black character's perspective and they are often the ones who have to do negotiations of their identity in order for the conflict to be resolved.¹⁸

Interracial buddy-cop films dominated the U.S. box office in the 1980s and 1990s due to the marketability of the films. Leading scholar in the field of detective films, Philippa Gates states, that Hollywood assumed that the films would appeal to Black audiences, by having a Black co-lead in the film, without making white audiences uncomfortable and drawing them

¹⁸ Ibid 17, 242.

away from the film.¹⁹ Guerrero believes that buddy-cop films placed the image of the Black male officer in a sort of “protective custody.” Guerrero writes that,

“Hollywood has but what is left of the Black presence on the screen in the protective custody, so to speak, of a White lead or co-star, and therefore in conformity with dominant, White sensibilities and expectations of what Blacks should be like.”²⁰

Due to the turn towards political and social conservatism in the 1980s Hollywood rarely placed a Black actor in the leading role of a Hollywood film that was not a comedic feature. Franklin T. Wilson and Howard Henderson’s study of the role of Black police officers in cop films from 1970 to 2011 supports this notion. Wilson and Henderson’s study, operated under the mode of cultivation analysis, found that of the 112 films examined, 89% of leads or co-leads in the films were white officers, while 9% were Black leads or co-leads in a film, and 1% had an Asian-American lead or co-lead.²¹ To support Guerrero’s point that fictional media tended to place the Black actor in “protective custody” of white co-stars in buddy-cop films, only 4% of the time was the Black character featured in a non-comedic role in relation to a white police officer or a civilian.²²

The late 1990’s and the early 2000’s featured a shift in the buddy-cop genre. Yet, as scholars Gates, Wilson, and Henderson have argued, the role of Black actors remained the same. For example, in the *Rush Hour* (1998, 2001, 2007) film franchise featuring Hong Kong action star Jackie Chan and stand-up comedian Chris Tucker, the traditional buddy-cop roles remained.

¹⁹ Gates, Philippa. “The Asian Renovation of Biracial Buddy Action: Negotiating Globalization in the Millennial Hollywood Cop Action Film.” *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, 01956051, 2012, Vol. 40, No. 2. 84.

²⁰ Ibid 17, 239.

²¹ Wilson T., Franklin and Henderson, Howard. “The Criminological Cultivation of African American Municipal Police Officers: Sambo or Sellout.” *Race and Justice* 2014, Vol 4. 55.

²² Ibid 21.

Tucker was the comedic relief that Black characters are traditionally placed in and Chan takes on the role of the competent action hero, that the white actor usually controls.²³ The 2000's action film explored the multi-racial and multi-ethnic urban center. Mary Beltran, identifies the influx of biracial actors and actresses due to "their natural ability to navigate in, command respect in, and, when necessary, handily kick ass in a variety of ethnic communities."²⁴ These characters reflected shifting racial and ethnic demographics, according to marketers, and were considered the most profitable stars for domestic and foreign audiences.

Just as race plays a significant role in the depictions of onscreen police officers in buddy-cop-action-comedies, gender does as well. Law enforcement is a male dominated profession, women account for a small percentage of roles within the workforce. Women account for an even smaller amount of police officers on film. According to Wilson and Blackburn, if women are depicted in cop films and television shows they are usually placed in roles pertaining to clerical work or social service positions.²⁵ Women face significant barriers in the workspace when it comes to being a police officer, such as, sexual and gender harassment and pregnancy and gender discrimination. All of these factors are rarely explored in fictional depictions of women police officers on film. The women police officer is usually tough and given hyper-masculine attributes in order to fit into the 'boys club' that is a police department.

Hyper-masculinity plays a significant role in the buddy-cop film. Often the films rely on depictions of the ideal Western version of masculinity, a heterosexual, middle-class, white male.

²³ Ibid 19, 91.

²⁴ Beltran C., Mary. "The New Hollywood Racelessness: Only the Fast, Furious, (and Multiracial) Will Survive." *Cinema Journal* Vol. 44, No. 2 (Winter, 2005), pp. 50-67. University of Texas Press. 54.

²⁵ Wilson T., Franklin and Blackburn G., Ashley. "The Depiction of Female Municipal Police Officers in the First Four Decades of the Core Cop Film Genre: 'It's a Man's World'" *Women & Criminal Justice*, Vol. 24 No. 2, 83-105. 87.

Scholars of gender, have defined hyper-masculinity as an exaggeration of stereotypical masculine traits, such as physicality, aggression, and sexuality.²⁶ The 1980's buddy-cop-action films bolsters images of this form of masculinity by showcasing amplified versions of white male aggression, physicality, and sexuality, therefore placing them on a pedestal. Black masculinity is forced into a subservient role.²⁷ Eventually, this form of hyper-masculinity went out of fashion. As Gates writes,

“For example, the reliance on muscle-power and firepower as the hero's most effective weapons against crime was celebrated in the cop action-films of the 1980s but was seen as a shortcoming by the mid-1990s: today's heroes must employ brains, wit, and cunning rather than rely on gunplay to triumph over the enemy.”²⁸

These hyper-masculine traits that were once deemed beneficial in the 1980s would later be considered a disadvantage in the late 1990s and 2000s.

Making a Militarized and Hyper-Aggressive Force

There has been a considerable amount of new research about post-1960s policing practices across the United States. Some of the findings show that federal laws passed under the Kennedy and subsequently the LBJ administration created a precedent for military forces sharing technology and equipment between domestic police departments. These studies also show that punitive drug laws originated in New York City, and, would later shape the development of national drug laws culminating in the use of the phrase: War on Drugs. Studies also demonstrate

²⁶ Sparks, Richard. “Masculinity and Heroism in the Hollywood ‘Blockbuster’: The Culture Industry and Contemporary Images of Crime and Law Enforcement.” *The British Journal of Criminology*. Vol. 36 No. 3. 348-360. 356.

²⁷ Gates, Philippa. “The Myths of Masculinity” *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film*. Ithaca: State University of New York Press, 2006. 35.

²⁸ Ibid 27. “Investigating Crisis: The Spectacle of “Masculinity” 137

how Los Angeles in the 1980s and 1990s was ground zero for the crack-cocaine epidemic and militarized policing tactics that would culminate in the Rodney King incident. In summary, the major characteristics of this shift are militarization, physical policing practices, and the use of technology.

Siegel details the slow “scaffolding” process that transformed the U.S.’s police departments from community assistances into militarized officers. From 1962 to 1974 the Office of Public Safety (OPS) was a federal program that deployed American police officers to train foreign police officers in counterinsurgent methods. In its twelve years of existence the office distributed about \$200 million worth of firearms, equipment and technology to police forces in forty-seven countries, trained over 7,500 senior officers at academies across the world and the U.S., and sent 1,500 advisers overseas to train one million rank-and-file policemen.²⁹ In 1968 the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act created the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) a 12 year \$8 billion program that used block grants for all fifty states and private entities to develop public safety related programs, with police departments receiving a majority of the funding.³⁰ The LEAA notably exchanged weapons and technology, such as pistols and police vehicles. It later turned into transferring OPS and military grade technologies to American police forces. The militarization of the U.S. police forces was a gradual process “building upon much older scaffolding to produce the vast, variegated policing apparatus of the carceral state.”³¹ The federal and local police infrastructure was already in place and federal

²⁹ Siegel, Micol. “Objects of Police History.” *The Journal of American History: Special Issues: “Historians and the Carceal State.”* June 2015. 159.

³⁰ Ibid 29

³¹ Ibid 29. 161

agencies merely had to take the steps to fit the pieces together in order to create one of the largest police forces in the world.

Two major American cities are quintessential examples of the development of a tough policing, New York City and Los Angeles. Julilly Kohler-Hausmann's details how New York City became the point of origin for strict War on Crime laws. According to Kohler-Hausmann, New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller's, "tough on crime" and drug prevention laws laid the foundation for federal prosecution guidelines on drug crimes for nearly 20 years.³² Rockefeller and, state lawmakers, encouraged by frustrated constituents, used an aggressive public relations campaign, to shift New York's opinion of the average drug user. The campaign, systematically, stripped the state (and the city) of all drug prevention, social welfare, and rehabilitation programming. As Kohler-Hausmann concludes,

"Through these "tough" laws, Rockefeller asserted a different vision of government; painting the picture of a powerful, vengeful state that seemed unburdened by the legitimacy crisis of liberalism."³³

This vision of state government and its role in state intervention in public health and economic crisis's would reverberate across the country for years to come.

Los Angeles also experienced a significant period of reallocations of funds to the city's police department and away from local social welfare programs. According to Donna Murch, Los Angeles exists under a

³² Kohler-Hausmann, Julilly. "The "Attila The Hun Law": New York's Rockefeller Drug Laws and the Making of a Punitive State." *Journal of Social History* Vol. 44, No. 1 (2010). 71. Oxford University Press.

³³ Ibid 32. 89

“semi-martial state that continues to exist today. This is via funding, fiscal allocation and resources to multiple policing, community, and judicial efforts to combat this alleged enemy.”³⁴

Los Angeles was a perfect storm of fiscal, political, and judicial restrictions being enforced on the city’s state-sponsored social welfare programs, that were often implemented and performed by police departments. Elizabeth Hinton cites blatant examples of the militarization of the Los Angeles police department and biased policing practices such as, 1988’s “Crips & Bloods Street Gangs Handbook” released by the California Attorney General. The handbook was an official tool that encouraged California law enforcement to racially profile low-income Black men.³⁵ As Murch noted, the effects of these profiling tactics would be felt for generations. As Hinton concludes:

“The militarization of American police and the over policing of black neighborhoods is a policy path that has consistently proven highly unsuccessful as a crime reduction strategy and fuels mass incarceration and the racial disparities within the nation’s enormous carceral complex.”³⁶

In March of 1991 these policing practices would come to a head in Los Angeles. Regina Lawrence details the importance of the Rodney King case in transforming American’s minds about excessive use of force and hyper-aggressive policing tactics. Lawrence notes that that incident “... is crucial to understand is how so many people came to see the King incident as

³⁴ Murch, Donna. “Crack in Los Angeles: Crisis, Militarization, and Black Response to the Late Twentieth-Century War on Drugs.” *The Journal of American History: Special Issues: “Historians and the Carceal State.”* June 2015. 164.

³⁵ Hinton, Elizabeth. “From the War on Crime to the War on Drugs” *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*. Harvard University Press. 2016. 307-333.

³⁶ Ibid 35. “Epilogue.” 339.

symbolic of deeper and more pervasive problems in the American criminal-justice system.”³⁷

Los Angeles and New York City are just two examples of American cities that are researched sociologically and historically in order to track the militarization of their police departments.

These sources highlight the role of the judicial system, federal, and local state governments in the growth of the militarized law enforcement. Through reallocation of funds, shuttering of social welfare programs, and the encouragement of hyper-aggressive tactics, the practices utilized by contemporary American policing practices that we see today came to be. These sources are helpful for a sociological and criminological perspective but they fail to mention the role of fictional media in normalizing the idea that excessive force, brutality, and military grade technology are necessary to maintain order. My study fills that void; these studies did not address these issues, because it was not their intended purpose. I examine how fictional media can produce, reproduce, and legitimize dominant ideologies about American law enforcement.

Methodology

The texts that I believe complicate the traditional dynamics that appear in buddy-cop films are *Bad Boys II* and *The Heat*. These two films manage to rely on traditional beats of the buddy-cop genre (a pair of law enforcement agents dealing with interpersonal dynamics of their occupation, while trying to take down a drug dealer) while also contributing something new to the genre (two Black police officers are paired together and two women police officers are paired together). *The Heat* stars Sandra Bullock and Melissa McCarthy, as FBI agent Sarah Ashburn and Detective Shannon Mullins, respectfully, and was directed by Paul Feig. Ashburn, an up-

³⁷ Lawrence, G. Regina. “Chapter Eight: Accidents Will Happen.” From *The Politics of Force: Media and the Construction of Police Brutality*. University of California Press. 2000. 178.

tight FBI agent, has found herself assigned to a drug investigation in Boston in hopes that she will take down a mysterious drug dealer working out of the city. Mullins, the local hot-tempered detective, is forced to work with Ashburn. Throughout the movie, the pair find themselves in a series of hi-jink situations which highlights the clash in their personalities. In the end it is revealed that an agent from another federal agency is actually the drug dealer. The women come to a resolve in their initially tense friendship over the course of solving the case. *Bad Boys II* is the sequel to 1995's *Bad Boys*. The film is directed by Michael Bay, known for his explosive and loud action set pieces. *Bad Boys II* stars Will Smith and Martin Lawrence as Mike Lowery and Marcus Burnett, respectfully. Mike Lowery is the smooth-talking trigger happy police officer, while Marcus Burnett is the goofy family man. The film follows the two detectives in Miami trying to investigate and stop the drug trade of a Cuban drug lord. After a series of explosions, car chase scenes, and fire fights, the drug lord is eventually killed and the case is solved.

Police brutality, use of force, and excessive or unnecessary force, is quite hard to define and the definition shifts based off of the person who is asked. What a law enforcement officer and a civilian would consider to be police brutality or excessive force is quite different. For the sake of my thesis project I use, Jerome H. Skolnick's and J.J. Fyfe's definition of police brutality, excessive force, and use of force. Brutality is "a conscious and venal act by officers who usually take great pains to conceal their misconduct."³⁸ Excessive or unnecessary force "is usually a training problem, the result of ineptitude or insensitivity," while use of force is considered to be a necessary and legitimate tool of the police officer's job.³⁹ These definitions, not only include the physical moment of harassment and violence that transpires between the

³⁸ Skolnick, Jerome H., and James J. Fyfe. 1992. The dark blue code of silence. *New York Times*, May 2, I22. 1993. Above the law. New York: Free Press.

³⁹ Ibid 38

police officer and the victim, but it also brings in the institutional influences that can drive the particularly tense and impactful moment.

Using this definition of excessive force and police brutality I focus on specific scenes in *Bad Boys II* and *The Heat* where the lead characters are exhibiting these actions towards a character(s) that has been presented as an informant, civilian, or witness to the audience.

Encoding and cultivation analysis are important to my analysis of *The Heat* and *Bad Boys II* because both methodologies explore how the violence in fictional media can inform how the public comes to understand violence and its relationship with authority figures and the maintenance of hegemony in society. I provide a textual analysis of these scenes using a combination of encoding/decoding model and cultivation theory, I am not doing a quantitative reading of the scenes, but I am using cultivation analysis framework of repeated viewings of buddy-cop-action-comedies, and how they can mirror certain attributes of policing practices that take place in real life. These scenes depict interrogations, raids, and shoot-outs with the law enforcement officers and their adversaries, though these scenes are hyper-violent and action oriented moments within the scenes violence is played for laughs and spectacle for the audience.

I also perform an industrial analysis surrounding *Bad Boys II* and *The Heat*. It is important to understand the industrial influences of Hollywood that went into producing these films. These are mainstream Hollywood releases that were intended to circulate through the film and television industry and the way that they have traveled through media distribution circuits, such as streaming services and syndication on broadcast cable television network, are intended to reach a mass audience. I believe it is important to consider why Hollywood felt that these films would be viable box office successes. Trade journals and some entertainment blogs such as *Variety*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, *IndieWire*, and *Vulture*, will assist my analysis in order to

highlight the critical discussion and industrial implications of these films which is key to understanding the popular culture visibility these films had on audiences.

Thesis Chapter Structure

Chapter one features an introduction of the thesis project. Chapter two is a historical analysis of the transformation of the American police force into a militarized institution exploring how these developments would later be reflected in the buddy-cop genre. Chapter three is an industrial and textual analysis of *Bad Boys II*. Chapter four also consists of an industrial and textual analysis of *The Heat*. The concluding chapter explores the core questions; what is the relationship between entertainment and police brutality, what can the buddy-cop genre tell us about real world violence and on-screen violence, and open up a larger discussion about storytelling in police fiction.

CHAPTER TWO: THE DEVELOPMENT OF U.S. LAW ENFORCEMENT AND A BRIEF HISTORY OF CRIMINAL FICTION

Introduction

The second chapter of this project explores the history of the gradual militarization of the American police force over the course of forty years, spanning from multiple social and political movements throughout the U.S. I explore how the militarization of the American police force and its technologies did not occur over night, but rather, developed through the passing of state and federal laws, reallocation of funds, and a shift in understanding of policing tactics in communities of color. This is explored using two of the most recognizable American cities as case studies; New York City and Los Angeles. I use these cities as snapshots of the militarization of the American law enforcement through the decades. All the while, I will explore the role that these adaptations took in fictional media, by graphing the development of the buddy-cop-action-comedy film genre. With this project, I am not attempting to identify whether or not police practices that are instructed in real life appear in these fictional films. However, I am exploring the moment when violence and humor come together in the buddy-cop-action-comedy, thus causing audiences to be attuned and comfortable with police rough-housing Black and Latinx people.

Shaping the Public's Opinion

The topic of police brutality has entered the mainstream news cycle over the past ten years in the U.S. Conversations arise whenever a video of an unarmed Black person being brutally beaten or fatally shot goes viral on social media, which creates a subsequent public outcry for justice. This typically causes many Americans to wonder, why are Black and Latinx communities bearing the brunt of police vitriol. Another conversation also arises about the

technology used within these departments. Some Americans may wonder when and how did various municipal police departments across the country become so militarized?

When protests break out after the latest unjust killing of an unarmed Black person in the U.S., Americans can quickly expect an aggressive police response. This became most notable after the death of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri, was fatally shot by a white police officer, Darren Wilson, his body was left untouched in the street for four hours.⁴⁰ In the hours and days that followed Michael Brown's death, protests erupted in the town of Ferguson, a small, predominantly Black American town right outside of St. Louis. As protests erupted in the city, the rallying cry #BlackLivesMatter (#BLM), was further cemented, after Twitter users connected Brown's death to the slaying of Trayvon Martin in Florida just two years earlier. As all eyes were turned to the city of Ferguson, many protesters were tear gassed, brutally beaten by police officers, tanks and armored trucks patrolled the streets, and other such hyper-aggressive policing tactics were used against protestors that were demanding Brown's killer be brought to justice.

The armored cars, tanks, and assault rifles that the Ferguson police departments brandished against the civilians protesting against the killing of Michael Brown, led many to wonder when and why did the U.S. police become so militarized. The protests in Ferguson, Missouri did not begin the discussion of the militarization, but it made the conversation enter into the mainstream consciousness. In the years that have followed since the Ferguson protests, there have unfortunately, been several other cases of unarmed Black and Latinx people being

⁴⁰ "Timeline of Events in Shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson." August 8, 2019. *Associated Pressnews.com*. <https://apnews.com/article/9aa32033692547699a3b61da8fd1fc62>

shot and killed by police officers, and discussions surrounding police brutality and the militarization of the police remain in the forefront of American's minds.

Fictional and non-fictional media plays a significant role in shaping American's understanding about the role of law enforcement in society. Though researchers have suggested that the main qualifier in determining a person's attitudes towards police officers is through personal experiences whether it is a voluntary or involuntary interaction.⁴¹ There is a proliferation of literature, television, and film surrounding the topic of law enforcement, whether it is a small town sheriff, the FBI, or major American city police officers, policing is a popular subject for entertainment. Most Americans, may not interact with the police in their daily lives, therefore for some Americans, how they learn about and understand the role of law enforcement is through the media. This can potentially create a distorted view and understanding of the role the police should and do have in Americans lives. This can be seen for other professions, such as healthcare workers, emergency responses workers, and politicians. All of these professions are technically considered to be public servants and all are often great source material for Hollywood to create film and television shows around.

Tropes have developed from these fictional portrayals of these professions, such as the bumbling politician, or the highly intelligent doctor, or the focus of this project, buddy cops – police officers who come from different backgrounds but are forced to come together to solve a common issue. The buddy-cop trope has existed for over forty years and is home to some of the most popular film and television franchises for example, *Lethal Weapon* (1987, 1989, 1992,

⁴¹ Joel Miller, Robert C. Davis, Nicole J. Henderson, John Markovic, and Christopher W. Ortiz. "Public Opinions of the Police: The Influence of Friends, Family, and News Media." *Vera Institute of Justice*. Dec. 2003. 3 (22 on the PDF). <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/205619.pdf>

1998) and *Miami Vice* (1984). Each of these depictions, though fictional in nature, can inform the public's understanding of these professions. In the upcoming pages I identify the key characteristics of the gradual militarization of physical practices and technologies of law enforcement while also tracking the rise of the buddy-cop-action-comedy film. I am not suggesting that the two directly influenced each other, but I am suggesting that Hollywood executives recognized there was a change taking place in their audience's desires and, created projects accordingly, based off of the profitability of the genre.

Tale of Two Coasts

21st century policing has roots in federal and state practices that were enacted over the course of thirty years across the U.S. In "Objects of Police History" Micol Siegel details the slow "scaffolding"⁴² of transformation that took place in creating today's hyper-militarized police department. In 1962, the Office of Public Safety (OPS) was established by former President John F. Kennedy and was located under the Agency for International Development (USAID). The police officers would train foreign police departments in counterinsurgent methods. In 1968, five years after the creation of the OPS, the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act created the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) a twelve year, eight-billion-dollar program that used block grants for all fifty states and private entities which helped to develop public-safety programs, with police departments receiving a majority of the funding.⁴³ The LEAA notably exchanged weapons and technology, such as pistols and police vehicles, and eventually developed the OPS transferring military grade technologies to American police forces.

⁴² Siegel, Micol. "Objects of Police History." *The Journal of American History: Special Issues: "Historians and the Carceal State."* June 2015. 161

⁴³ Ibid 42. 159.

The OPS operated abroad for twelve years but was later disbanded in 1974 by Congress after word spread the agency was essentially teaching and condoning torture techniques along with the assignments being inherently political; the officers were often deployed to countries where fears of the rise of communism were high, such as, Korea, Japan, Iran, and Greece.⁴⁴ In its twelve years the office distributed two-hundred million dollars' worth of firearms, equipment and technology to police forces in forty-seven countries, trained over 7,500 senior officers at academies across the world and the U.S., and sent 1,500 advisers overseas to train one million rank-and-file policemen.⁴⁵ Though the OPS closed in 1974, its influence would be felt and seen in other federal agencies, such as the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). Laws were passed that allowed for American military intervention in countries that did not have standing military units and emergency law enforcement officers. The OPS employees would also work with private American corporations in training their security staff against worker unrest. The counterinsurgent methods that the OPS were known for training foreign officers and soldiers in could be seen domestically during the social and political unrest that swept across the U.S. in the 1960s and the 1970s. These techniques can still be seen today when police attempt to disperse crowds during protests and riots. Because the OPS often straddled the line of private and public, police and military, the lines between domestic and foreign methods quickly became blurred.

“Political theorists explain that police and military occupy points along the continuum of state violence,” Seigel argues, “separated sometimes spatially and at other moments by philosophy – the fluid line between them now and again dissolved.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid 42. 153

⁴⁵ Ibid 42, 153.

⁴⁶ Ibid 42, 157.

This line has remained in flux even today in the relationship between American law enforcement and civilians.

The effects of the carceral state, mass incarceration, and brutal policing practices were felt by many communities of color across the country, but two major American cities are quintessential examples of the tough policing, New York City and Los Angeles. New York City is considered by some police history and drug law experts as the point of origin for strict War on Crime laws. It is also where the term War on Drugs was coined, by then Governor Nelson Rockefeller. In 1973 Rockefeller's "tough on crime" and drug prevention laws would lay the foundation for federal prosecution guidelines on drug crimes for the next twenty years.⁴⁷ New York City citizens were in constant correspondence with Rockefeller, a liberal Republican, demanding an increased presence of police and military force and higher criminal sentencing, in reaction to the Black and Latinx residents who they felt were infringing on their rights and their access to jobs. Rockefeller's drug laws moved from viewing the drug addict as the diseased to being the *diseased*. The addict was the root of the problem.⁴⁸ The laws declared that the liberal-rehabilitative style of solving drug addiction simply did not work. It was time to strictly enforce drug addiction; seeing as how it was viewed as crime and not a sickness. Through public relations campaigns New York shifted the opinion of the drug user, creating the idea that heroin was a Black and Latinx problem. In reality, heroin was being used in the suburbs across the state, particularly by Vietnam war veterans, at increasing rates.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Kohler-Hausmann, Julily. "The "Attila The Hun Law": New York's Rockefeller Drug Laws and the Making of a Punitive State." *Journal of Social History* Vol. 44, No. 1 (fall 2010). 71. Oxford University Press.

⁴⁸ Ibid 47.

⁴⁹ Ibid 47,75.

Rockefeller's punitive laws sentenced the accused to serve jail time in accordance with the amount of drugs found on their person during the time of arrest. The accused would carry the conviction on their record for the rest of their lives unless they became a police informant which entailed regularly providing law enforcement with information about a drug operation. Usually this offer would not be beneficial for street-level dealers who had little to no information about the larger enterprise.⁵⁰ Rockefeller's laws were also a signal that preventative programs did not work and the real drug prevention was harsh on the ground policing.

“Through these “tough” laws, Rockefeller asserted a different vision of state government; painting the picture of a powerful, vengeful state that seemed unburdened by the legitimacy crisis of liberalism.”⁵¹

This vision of state government would reverberate across the country for years to come.

Shifts in funding promoted a change in policing styles as well, instead of officers wearing their uniforms while on duty, officers turned to wearing their plain-clothes. Plain-clothes policing practices were usually important for undercover operations. Undercover criminal operations were created by the FBI in 1972 after the long-time director J. Edgar Hoover died. By 1985 the FBI was performing at least 350 undercover criminal investigations within their organization. The first allocation request from Congress was in 1977 requesting a million dollars and by 1984 they were requesting nearly twelve million dollars in tax payer's money to be allocated to undercover criminal investigations.⁵² At the behest of several national commissions and The Commission of Law Enforcement and Administration Justice act of 1967, which urged

⁵⁰ Ibid 47, 83

⁵¹ Ibid 47, 89

⁵² Gary T. Marx. “Changing Nature of Undercover Work” in *Undercover: Police Surveillance in America*. University of California Press. 4-5.

every major American city to have a special unit at the ready to perform undercover operations. These units were directed to investigate, infiltrate, and apprehend any information that they could on organized crime operations.⁵³ Eventually, they would become some of the most prestigious units within municipal police departments. Plain-clothes officers and federal agents became embedded in multiple seeds of criminal operations. While ingratiating themselves in these organizations; sometimes investigators were not sure if criminal acts were being committed. These officers were able to sell drugs, stolen goods, and participate in other illegal activities in order to perform their jobs. The authorities were seeking out violators.⁵⁴ This style of policing was depicted in the buddy-cop-action-comedy films of the 1980s. Characters were usually plain-clothed detectives or federal agents, who could easily slip into the operations that they were investigating.

On the other side of the country the draconian War on Drug laws that passed in New York in 1973 could also be felt in L.A. a decade later as the crack-cocaine epidemic waged in the Black community. Two-thirds of offenders in federal prison and half the state prison population were in correctional facilities for drug offenses between 1985 and 2000.⁵⁵ And just like New York City in the 1970s L.A. also experienced a significant period of reallocations of funds to the city's police department and away from local social welfare programs. According to Donna Murch, Los Angeles existed under a "semi-martial state."⁵⁶ Los Angeles, experienced a mix of fiscal, political, and judicial restrictions being put in place on the city's state-sponsored social

⁵³ Ibid 52, 6-7.

⁵⁴ Ibid 52, 7-8.

⁵⁵ Hinton, Elizabeth. "Introduction" *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*. Harvard University Press: 2016. 164.

⁵⁶ Murch, Donna. "Crack in Los Angeles: Crisis, Militarization, and Black Response to the Late Twentieth-Century War on Drugs." *The Journal of American History: Special Issues: "Historians and the Carceal State."* June 2015. 164.

welfare programs, that were often implemented by police departments. With the passing of LEAA in 1968 and the shuttering and subsequent various reassigning of the OPS missions in 1974, LAPD continuously acquired military grade technology, firearms, and counterinsurgent methods for decades.

Former President Richard Nixon began efforts to get tough on crime at the national level, but a decade later Ronald Reagan's presidential administration would take things a step further. The relationship between domestic police forces, federal and military agencies increased tenfold with the passing of the Military Cooperation with Civilian Law Enforcement Agencies Act in 1981. This act "permitted defense agencies to provide local police forces access to weapons, intelligence, research and military bases to improve drug interdiction efforts."⁵⁷ Congress would later reauthorize the Department of Defense to intervene in civilian law enforcement affairs a year later. They did this based off of an expanding definition of "indirect military involvement" that appears in the Act.⁵⁸

Eventually the LEAA became obsolete, there was no longer a need to exchange weapons and technology between the military and domestic police forces. Reagan's law incentivized police departments to make drug arrests. The law permitted that any assets that departments seized in a criminal investigation and raids could be kept by the police departments. The departments would also receive bonuses as well for their acquired assets.⁵⁹ Police departments no longer had to exchange resources with the military, they could buy it themselves, due to the increase in revenue from the assets acquired in police raids and undercover sting operations. Even though most people would get their charges dropped their assets would remain seized in

⁵⁷ Ibid 55. "Chapter 9: From the War on Crime to the War on Drugs." 311

⁵⁸ Ibid 57.

⁵⁹ Ibid 55. "Chapter 9: From the War on Crime to the War on Drugs." 313.

these large operations. Because of the incentives and at the encouragement of the departments there was an increase in large sting operations that would arrest thousands of people at once. For example, 1987's Operation Hammer was an operation a part of LAPD's C.R.A.S.H. unit, a notoriously violent unit focused on investigating gang and drug activity in southern Los Angeles. In a single weekend LAPD arrested over a thousand Black and Latinx men and searched them for drugs and other illegal items under Operation Hammer. Very few people were actually charged for illegal contraband.⁶⁰ Some police officers took advantage of the increase of seized assets and bonuses flowing into the police departments, some officers were tempted to "skim from the top" when assets came into the department.⁶¹ This is the era where the 'dirty cop' trope thrived in police fiction, as seen in films like *Colors* (1988) and *Internal Affairs* (1990). Several punitive drug laws passed throughout the 1980s and 1990s which further put a stranglehold on Black and Latinx communities, extending drug offense sentences and allowing the police more access and leeway into Black and Latinx communities.

A blatant example of the militarization of the Los Angeles police department and biased policing practices can be seen in 1988's "Crips & Bloods Handbook" released by the California Attorney General. The handbook was an official tool that encouraged California law enforcement to racially profile low-income Black men. The handbook featured profiling techniques based off age, suggesting their key targets were within the ages of 13-40 years old. Personality; stating these men usually had "very egocentric personalities" and shared "womanizing" tendencies. The men might catch the eye of an LAPD officer based on their clothing attire wearing items such as: "heavy gold chains, national sports team shirts, brand name

⁶⁰ Malcolm, Klein. *The American street gang: its nature, prevalence, and control*. Oxford University Press. 1997.

⁶¹ Ibid 57.

jogging suits, British Knights tennis shoes, and pagers.” Eventually some gang members caught wind of this particular profiling tactic and would later begin dressing less ostentatiously in “neutral clothing.”⁶² Temperament was also cause for concern for LAPD officers as well: if a Black man was congenial to a police officer during a traffic stop it meant they were familiar with the police and were probably criminals. Therefore, the police should become more hostile towards the suspect.⁶³ Lastly LAPD officers were encouraged to profile using Jim Crow era practices of policing towards interracial relationships. If a Black man was seen with a white woman, it meant that he was a drug trafficker, and she was carrying the drugs.⁶⁴ These hyper-vigilant policing practices encouraged officers to find menial reasons to apprehend young Black men in L.A. It is fair to assume that these practices also did significantly more harm than good within the Black and Latinx communities of LA. “The militarization of American police and the overpolicing of black neighborhoods,” Elizabeth Hinton writes,

“is a policy path that has consistently proven highly unsuccessful as a crime reduction strategy and fuels mass incarceration and the racial disparities within the nation’s enormous carceral complex.”⁶⁵

These tactics would eventually be encoded in fictionalized depictions of law enforcement along with local TV news.

In March 1991, the Rodney King tape formally introduced the topic of police brutality into American’s minds. Most media historians and journalists consider the Rodney King tape to be one of the most important and widely recognizable examples of police brutality in the U.S.

⁶² Ibid 55. “Chapter 9: From the War on Crime to the War on Drugs.” 327.

⁶³ Ibid 55. “Chapter 9: From the War on Crime to the War on Drugs.” 328-329.

⁶⁴ Ibid 55. “Chapter 9: From the War on Crime to the War on Drugs.” 328

⁶⁵ Ibid 57. “Epilogue.” 339.

because it was one of the most *highly* publicized cases of police brutality that the U.S. had seen. It is important to note that King's tape was not the first time Americans had witnessed police brutality on film, images of police violence could be seen on television during the Civil Rights movement and anti-war protests of the 1970s. Violent displays of police aggression can be seen in pictures and film clips appearing from the Selma to Montgomery March of 1965 and the Kent State shooting of 1970. These issues were rather divisive moments and topics in American history, these stories were reported by journalist through a politicized lens. For some viewers the acts of the police may have been justified. The Rodney King tape showcased an issue that some had deemed illegitimate for years, the excessive media attention the case received would force some Americans to reckon with the fact that police brutality and harassment was an issue that Americans should pay attention to.

Rodney King was beat for five minutes by six LAPD officers after engaging in a car chase up a Los Angeles highway. The part of the video that was infamously broadcasted onto television news stations across the country is a 10-15 second interval that showcases the most brutal portion of the beating.⁶⁶ Up until the video was released LAPD maintained an exemplar record in the eyes of the public outside of the city's communities of color. After the video was released, LAPD's atrocities against communities of color across the city were revealed to the public. King's beating and the subsequent misfire that was LAPD's publicity response to the case created a media storm. Though, the police officers were acquitted on all charges related to the beating, the city of Los Angeles and the country could not forget the injustice. According to Regina Lawrence what "is crucial to understand is how so many people came to see the King

⁶⁶ Regina G. Lawrence. "Chapter Four: Setting the Agenda." In *The Politics of Force: Media and the Construction of Police Brutality*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2000. 71.

incident as symbolic of deeper and more pervasive problems in the American criminal-justice system.”⁶⁷ The cases of Rodney King and Michael Brown are not bookmarks in the relationship between the Black community and law enforcement in the U.S. These cases are just two of the many stories that grabbed the headlines and the attention of Americans at the national level and turned all eyes on U.S. law enforcement at the global level as well.

After the Rodney King case concluded, nationally, the narrative surrounding police brutality had somewhat faded to black. Entering into the new millennium there would be stories that captured the attention of the American news cycle at the national level, such as the brutal torture of Abner Louima by NYPD in 1997⁶⁸ and over a decade later the racial profiling of the prolific Civil Rights activist and Harvard University professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. in 2009 by a Cambridge, Massachusetts police officer.⁶⁹ Discussions of police brutality were no longer the main concern for news broadcasters, especially in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001. The attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, caused a shift in how Americans viewed policing tactics. In the immediate months following 9/11, Americans approval towards law enforcement was favorable. Law enforcement officers, along with firefighters, and EMT’s responded to the destruction that became of the Twin Towers in downtown Manhattan. The emergency workers immediately went to work combing through the rubble to find bodies and save as many lives as possible; the same could be said of the first responders at the Pentagon and the downed plane in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

⁶⁷ Ibid 66. “Chapter Eight: Accidents Will Happen.” 178.

⁶⁸ Tony, Hays. “Torture Suit Reaches \$9M Settlement.” *The Associated Press News.com*. 22, March, 2001. <https://apnews.com/article/500213b43575774c99273a9b7d31a513>.

⁶⁹ Emily Guskin, Mahvish Shahid Khan and Amy Mitchell. “The Arrest of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.” *Pew Research Center*. 26, July, 2010. <https://www.journalism.org/2010/07/26/arrest-henry-louis-gates-jr/>.

Americans were grateful for their first responders and felt as if they were truly protecting and serving their communities. This moment of goodwill eventually turned sour as Islamophobia and xenophobia increased in post-9/11 U.S. Rates of police profiling and mistreatment of Arabs, Muslims, Sikhs, and other individuals suspected of terrorist activities based off of their appearances increased ten-fold across the country. For several years in the 2000's the desire to "protect" the domestic homeland from another terror attack drove domestic law enforcement officers to ramp up their counter-intelligence technologies and counterterrorism units. In the immediate post-9/11 years support for law enforcement was high in parts of the U.S., Americans as a whole had to sacrifice privacies in the name of "national security" but as the years between 9/11 grew larger attention turned back again to the questionable practices of police officers in the 2010s.

The Buddy-Cop as a Film Genre

The police film genre has an array of different styles and subgenres of films underneath its umbrella. There are thrillers, dramas, actions, and comedies, and within these subgenres are sub-sub genres. One of those is the buddy-cop film, which itself has subgenres. Appearing in forms such as the southern drama as seen in 1967's Civil Rights era police-procedural *In the Heat of the Night*. Or a comedy like 1982's *48Hrs*, or a psychological thriller, as seen in 1995's murder-mystery, *Seven*. Buddy-cop films highlight, "the relationship between two heroes of contrasting backgrounds who – initially at odds – learn to respect one another and work together to defeat a common enemy."⁷⁰ This particular type of cop film rose to prominence in the 1980s due to multiple factors scholars have identified; such as, box office profitability, depictions of

⁷⁰ Philippa Gates. "The Asian Renovation of Biracial Buddy Action: Negotiating Globalization in the Millennial Hollywood Cop Action Film." *Journal of Popular Film & Television*. 2012, Vol. 40 Issue 2. Pg. 84. DOI: 10.1080/01956051.2011.636394.

idealized versions of race relations in the U.S., and what Gates has identified as a “crisis of masculinity.”⁷¹ Buddy-cop-comedies films feature all of the staples of a Hollywood blockbuster film, a discernible villain who threatens the protagonist(s), action-packed fighting, explosions, and a happy ending. Though buddy-cop films seem like popcorn fodder, they are in fact rife with political and social commentary on U.S. policing tactics.

Buddy-cop comedic films fall underneath the police film genre which has its origins in detective novels and short stories. Edgar Allan Poe’s C. Auguste Dupin is credited as being the first fictional detective. Poe introduced Dupin in his short story *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* in 1841.⁷² Dupin would later appear on screen in the 1930s and 1940s in short films. The most recognizable detective on-screen and in literature, is Sherlock Holmes. Holmes’s first on-screen appearance was in the mutoscope film titled *Sherlock Holmes Baffled* (1900).⁷³ At the time the character was considered to be a “criminalist” – a character who has a background in forensics.⁷⁴ The criminalist character would evolve into the detective who would eventually become the police character.

In each decade the detective would have a distinct personality trait that would go on to define the plot of the film and the genre as a whole. The film noir detective of the 1940s was classified as morally ambiguous, socially corrupt, and isolated from his fellow man. Humphrey Bogart appeared the most in films from this era, for example, 1941’s *The Maltese Falcon*.⁷⁵ The

⁷¹ Ibid 70. “The Myths of Masculinity.” 51.

⁷² Ibid 70, 5.

⁷³ Jon, Tuska. *The Detective in Hollywood: The Movie Careers of the Great Fictional Private Eyes and Their Creators*. Doubleday. 1978.

⁷⁴ Ibid 70, 5.

⁷⁵ “Noir Characters.” *Film Noir*. <https://13medsfilmnoir.weebly.com/noir-characters.html>. Accessed Feb. 16. 2021.

violent, misanthropic attitude, and womanizing characteristics that classified the film noir detective of the '40s continued into the 1950s.

In the 1950s it seemed as if the violent, misanthropic attitude, and womanizing characteristics became amplified. The detective was a bit more violent and aggressive and instead of falling prey to the flirtations of a femme fatale, the 1950s detective was abusive and misogynistic to the women in his life. This is seen in 1955's *Kiss Me Deadly*, featuring a "graceless caveman" Mike Hammer.⁷⁶ Hammer was a brash man, who did not have the same concern for others as Bogart's detectives did.

The 1960s films and television programs shifted to actual police officers, before, the protagonists of these films were private investigators, who were not as beholden and restricted by the law as actual law enforcement officers. The 1970s and 1980s featured a return to the violent film noir style detective of the 1940s. Films such as 1971's *Dirty Harry*, are an example of the violent, hyper-aggressive, white male detectives that appeared in the 1970s, some consider the film to be the decades answer to Mike Hammer's films.⁷⁷ The return to the noir style violence in police media, can also be seen in another television adaptation of the fictional character Mike Hammer. The television show ran from 1981 to 1986 and featured the exploits of the officer. In the 1990s and 2000s, police officers as characters were toned down again, similar to the wave that appeared in the 1960s. The officer was middle class, well-educated, and even featured a turn back to the original criminalist attributes that were in favor in the 1940s. This is seen in films

⁷⁶ Simon Abrams. "Mickey Spillane's Best Mike Hammer Hits Criterion via Kiss Me Deadly." *IndieWire*. Jun. 28.2011. <https://www.indiewire.com/2011/06/mickey-spillanes-best-mike-hammer-hits-criterion-via-kiss-me-deadly-237190/>.

⁷⁷ Ibid 76.

such as Morgan Freeman's *Kiss the Girls* (1997). In later years the detective's brain was valued higher than his brawn.⁷⁸

These historically-situated depictions reflected broader developments in society and culture at the time. The 1940s and 1950s film noir detective was a popular trope that arose out of post-WWII U.S. in response to the isolation that some American men felt after returning from one of the bloodiest wars in the world's history, thus drawing out a strong sense of cynicism from some American men. The 1960s detective was witness to the Civil Rights Movement, with films featuring police officers mulling over their positions on desegregation and the draconian Jim Crow laws that had the American South in its grip. The 1970s was a time of acute social and political unrest in the U.S.; the Women's Liberation Movement, the rise and fall of the Black Panther Party, LGBTQ+ gains towards civil rights, and the return from Vietnam. The police officers from these films in the 70s and 80s were war veterans grappling with the violence and destruction that they had encountered in the jungles of Vietnam, just like the WWII veterans of the 40s and 50s. In the 1990s and early 2000s the generation of Americans was one of the most educated in the country's history⁷⁹ and the racial/ethnic populace of the country was shifting drastically with the rise of immigrants making a home in the U.S. Americans were no longer exclusively concerned with a beefy action police star. This change would bring us into the 2010s.

The more racially diverse the American population became in the 1990s and throughout the new millennium Hollywood depictions of American law enforcement failed to evolve with the shifting population demographics, and remained mostly the same primarily relying on

⁷⁸ Ibid 70.

⁷⁹ Kristen Bialik and Richard Fry. "Millennial Life: How young adulthood today compares with prior generations." *Pewresearch.org*. Jan. 30. 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/02/14/millennial-life-how-young-adulthood-today-compares-with-prior-generations-2/>.

heterosexual white men in onscreen leading roles. Though there have been few instances where the buddy-cop-action-comedy genre has attempted to appear different, these films still hold influences from previous films in the buddy-cop-action-comedy genre. In the late 1950s and 1960s, some of the more partner-centric police films began to get popular such as the civil rights era based *In the Heat of the Night* and the *Defiant Ones*. These films were critical successes that gained interest from all. Typically, the partners were usually two white men, though in the 1980s the films relied on a Black man and a white man to create a new dynamic, the focus of the film was not exclusively on the race relations between the characters as seen in the 1960s films, but rather in the clash of personalities and policing styles. Gates, would suggest that,

“when President Nixon’s hard-line politics on crime and the widespread loss of confidence in law-enforcement were dominating the American psyche, the vigilante cop film presented masculinity that was tough, independent, violent, and successful in the war against crime.”⁸⁰

These films showcased an action hero who was competent and able to tackle crime that some Americans viewed as widespread and uncontrollable. The action hero was able to take on anything, no matter the cost, to save the day, this was the focus of the films as opposed to the original attention being placed exclusively on the races of the characters. Some Americans enjoyed seeing their heroes in this manner, in a way reminiscent of the traditional noir detective character who felt too restrained by the law in their quest to simply do what was right by their client or the community.⁸¹ These action heroes were products of an alleged ‘post-racial’ drive in

⁸⁰ Ibid 70. “Investigating Crisis: The Spectacle of Masculinity.” 126

⁸¹ Ibid 80, 129.

American conservatism, in the buddy-cop films of the 1980s race did not matter, but policing did.

The issues with these films lies in the fact that that the lead characters – the buddies – are portrayed as being overtly violent and mistreating the characters who are identified as their witnesses, suspects, or informants. During the scenes in question, the characters are not necessarily under arrest and not technically guilty of any crime. Yet, the officers harass, physically assault, and heckle the characters. These fictional actions reflect the police culture of the U.S. that has institutional rules in place, that make it difficult to prosecute and punish police officers who abuse their powers.

Lethal Weapon's

The *Lethal Weapon* franchises encompasses a turn towards this popular and social moment in the 1980s and the 1990s. *Lethal Weapon* premiered March 6th, 1987 directed by Richard Donner and written by Shane Black. The first film grossed \$120 million at the domestic and global box office and the franchise would go on to gross over \$700 million dollars in total at the global and domestic box offices.⁸² The franchises spawned three sequels and nearly two decades later a short-lived television adaptation. *Lethal Weapon*, is not only one of the most popular buddy-cop action-comedies, but it is also one of the more notable Hollywood action-film franchises of the 1980s and 1990s. For some, the *Lethal Weapon* films encapsulates everything about the 1980s action films and police comedies. The film features big explosions, car chases, extreme stunt-work, and an intense emotional bond between two men who would not typically share each other's company. *Lethal Weapon* films are also political in nature – each new film

⁸² Benjamin Svetkey. "Lethal Weapon' Wunderkind (and Former Party Boy) Shane Black Is Back ... and Still Looking for Action." *The Hollywood Reporter*. 13, May, 2006. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/lethal-weapon-wunderkind-party-boy-892186>.

featured a central villain that seemed rooted in the political moment that it was released in – and there is a peculiar stance on the state of American policing that underlies the films.

In the mid-to late 1980s, production costs skyrocketed (going from \$5 million in 1973 to \$23 million in 1989) as inflation, actor's salaries, and the reliance on computer special effects increased.⁸³ New style of stars emerged during this time, Hollywood studios valued the a muscled-up action hero, who was able to encompass at least one or all of these aspects in their performance such as performing high-intensity action sequences, serve as a heart-throb, and be able to maintain a comedic and charming attitude. Just as the stars of these action-films were integral to the profitability of the action-film, so were the directors and producers. Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer, produced multiple 1980s action-films such as *Lethal Weapon*, *48Hrs*, and *Die Hard*. This pair would go onto shape the genre of action-films over the next two decades. Bruckheimer and Simpson, “develop and make popular a visually slick, narratively simple, fast-paced, feel-good, high-octane, formula that many likened to feature-length music videos.”⁸⁴ The films were shaped for an increasingly global film market, creating set pieces and choosing actors that would appeal to audiences across the globe, not just domestically. This action-centric style of filmmaking is reflected in the *Lethal Weapon* franchise and would contribute to the popularity of the films for decades to come.

The first film introduces audiences to the two detectives in Los Angeles, California who have been tasked with investigating the death of a young woman whose ingestion of cocaine and subsequent fall from an apartment building is believed to be a murder, rather than an accident.

⁸³ James, Kendrick. “A Genre of Its Own: From Westerns, to Vigilantes, to Pure Action.” In *A Companion to the Action Film*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Inc. 2019. Pg 47.

⁸⁴ James Kendrick. *Hollywood Bloodshed: Violence in 1980s American Cinema*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press. 2009.

The investigation takes the two officers, Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson) and Roger Murtaugh (Danny Glover) through a series of shootouts and car chases the film eventually concludes with the pair celebrating each other after a successful triumph over the villain. Riggs is described throughout the film as having a “crazy” streak, or that he has a “death-wish”, performing increasingly dangerous stunts, that put him into harm’s way and could result in death. Riggs, is a highly-skilled former Special Forces Vietnam war veteran. Riggs’ emotional state is so volatile because of the recent death of his wife of eleven years. He has developed a reputation as unstable amongst his colleagues, even the department psychologist begs Riggs’ captain to put him on desk duty because he is suicidal, at which the captain scoffs. Roger Murtaugh is the older one of the pair and is an affable middle-aged, suburban father of three and husband of over ten years. The two initially clash heads and are visible opposites: Riggs is dressed in jeans, a flannel shirt, an army green jacket with a baseball hat pulled low over his eyes and Murtaugh is dressed in a professional beige suit. Murtaugh believes that Riggs is a threat to the department and tackles him to the ground when he sees that he has a gun. Riggs immediately counter-attacks and hurts Murtaugh. Later as they walk towards Murtaugh’s car, the differences in their ages and personality are clear: Murtaugh prefers an older model pistol, while Riggs cites the new models of guns that he has on his persons at all times, Murtaugh scoffs and refers to him as a “Lethal Weapon.” The film goes to great heights to show how opposite these men are; Black man vs. white man, middle-aged vs. young, married man vs. widowed man, etc. But the film also goes to great lengths to show that these oppositions are what makes their friendship stronger and all the more worthwhile when the mission is a success.

Shane Black wrote the script for *Lethal Weapon* at the age of 22 fresh out of UCLA in 1982. After hearing of the script, several Hollywood studios expressed an interest in *Lethal*

Weapon and Black eventually sold it for \$250,000 to Warner Bros.⁸⁵ Black took inspiration from the tough guy persona that Clint Eastwood channeled in *Dirty Harry* for the plot characters and the overall tone. Black intended to make an “urban western”⁸⁶ for *Lethal Weapon* and was writing what he saw in other action-comedies from earlier in the decade.⁸⁷ Black was interested in creating a bond between two men and not simply having the men be partners. “I think there’s a humanizing aspect to having the two people redeem each other rather than just one guy.”⁸⁸ The films featured topical plot lines for the 1980s and 1990s. The first film deals with themes related to soldiers returning home from war and the growing drug trafficking problem that major American cities, such as Los Angeles, were experiencing at the time. Eventually it is revealed that Murtaugh and Riggs enemies are fellow veterans, who turned to a life of crime after losing their ability to traffic drugs in Vietnam once the U.S. pulled out. Riggs and Murtaugh are horrified by the turn the soldiers have made, resulting in a hand to hand combat fight between two former Americans, once fighting on the same side, but now are enemies.

Lethal Weapon 2 (1989), went in a less dark route by choosing bigger action set pieces and leaning more into the emotional aspects of Murtaugh and Riggs relationship. The villain for the film was a South African diplomat who was smuggling illegal contraband into the U.S. and he was a firm supporter and beneficiary of Apartheid. Apartheid was a very contentious topic at the time that the film was released, causing the director Richard Donner to receive death threats

⁸⁵ James, Greenberg. “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Millionaire: When He Sold a \$1.75-million Screenplay, Shane Black Became a Hollywood Role model, Whether he likes it or not.” *The Los Angeles Times*. 19, August. 1990. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-08-19-tm-3052-story.html>.

⁸⁶ Roger Cormier and Garin Pirina. “25 Facts about Lethal Weapon.” *Mentalfloss.com*. 21, September. 2016. <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/76224/25-facts-about-lethal-weapon>.

⁸⁷ Ibid 85.

⁸⁸ Matt Singer. “Clipography with ‘The Nice Guys’ Director Shane Black.” *Screenrush.com*. 17, May. 2016. <https://screenrush.com/shane-black-nice-guys-clipography/>.

for their criticism over the policy.⁸⁹ For those on the left of American politics the topic of Apartheid may have been familiar, but as the 1980s progressed the systematic disenfranchisement of Black people in South Africa would capture the full attention of Americans due to the publicity the anti-Apartheid movement gained with the controversial imprisonment of Nelson Mandela and other anti-Apartheid activists. *Lethal Weapon 2* took a clear anti-Apartheid stance, in a satisfying ending Murtaugh shoots the South African villain point blank, gruffly proclaiming that his diplomatic immunity has been revoked. The South African villain had to face the consequences of his segregationist and fascist ideology.

Lethal Weapon 3's (1992) villain was an ex-LAPD officer turned arms dealer who was pushing kevlar piercing bullets. The film played with the dirty cop trope and the rise in gang violence that had marred Los Angeles for over two decades. With the focus on dirty cops inside LAPD, the third film focused more on the inter-office politics of police departments. The film featured investigations from internal affairs, and introduced a female rival and eventual lover to Martin Riggs. The former LAPD officer turned arms dealer was frustrated with poor pay and benefits that came from working as an LAPD officer. During his time on the force the former officer was also known to aggressively rough up suspects in custody. This characterization creates a line between how Riggs and Murtaugh police versus what the former LAPD officer did. *Lethal Weapon 4* (1998) focused on a Chinese smuggling ring and was the franchise's last-ditch effort at success for the studio, that was trying to compete with the gritty and satirical violence of Quentin Tarantino and John Woo.⁹⁰ This film featured a turn to the Chinese immigrant

⁸⁹ Ibid 86.

⁹⁰ Noel Murray. "The Lethal Weapon series subverted the buddy-cop blockbuster, then defined it." July, 14, 2016. *Avclub.com*. <https://film.avclub.com/the-lethal-weapon-series-subverted-the-buddy-cop-blockb-1798249573>.

population of Los Angeles, showcasing scenes in Chinatown and featuring the city's growing human trafficking problem. The film also drew interest from an international audience due to it being the American acting debut of Hong Kong action star Jet Li. The *Lethal Weapon* franchise's topical plot lines reveal that though these films are fictional and the set pieces can be quite fantastical at certain points; they are in fact rooted in a twentieth century urban American setting.

The films dealt with plot points that were relevant for the time and took political stances that were quite easy for audiences to read. For the *Lethal Weapon* franchise, its stance on policing practices in the U.S. was quite murky. The films were released when there were multiple changes taking place to U.S. law enforcement via institutional changes, though *Lethal Weapon* was an action-buddy-cop comedy there was little commentary about actual police officers. Between Riggs and Murtaugh the pair create a 'balanced' policing relationship, not unlike most police partner's in the buddy-cop-action-comedy. Riggs takes on the more vigilante-instinctual style of policing. Riggs is always ready to go leaps and bounds – literally – in order to apprehend a suspect. He is volatile, but because of his checkered past, solidified bond with Murtaugh, and the effectiveness of his aggression in the field, it is deemed as loveable and shrugged off. Murtaugh, is the highly professionalized officer of the two. Initially meeting Riggs, Murtaugh views Riggs policing style as reckless and classifies him as a danger to himself and the public. Eventually Murtaugh develops a deep appreciation for Riggs action packed policing compared to his more clerical style. Though, Murtaugh, is not physically averse to handling a suspect, he views it as one of the many aspects that comes along with being a Los Angeles police officer, just like filling out paperwork, while Riggs views physical altercations as a way to show off his physical prowess against suspects in order to incite fear in them.

The films do not present a clear endorsement of either styles of policing. Creating an either/or aspect of American policing, the highly professionalized version works just as effectively as the aggressive action-packed policing. Within these films it implicitly and explicitly states that there is an appreciation for the extra-legal form of policing that Murtaugh and Riggs perform. On the surface this may not seem entirely troublesome, like most fictional depictions of police in the U.S. it is riddled with political and social subtext. The lack of stance taken towards the policing styles of the stars of the film speaks volumes just as much as if the films had taken a hard and fast stance towards their policing styles. The films admit that there are flaws in both styles of policing but refuse to acknowledge it or allow the officers to change their styles of policing. The diverging opinions of what constitutes correct policing can be seen in real life discussions of policing and civil liberties, officers may believe that their hyper-vigilant or hyper-professional style of policing is not what a community needs, but there are personal and institutional pieces at play that prevent them from changing.

The ideologies about policing, race, and masculinity in the *Lethal Weapon* franchise were inherently American and featured the promotion of hegemonic patriarchal ideas that was deeply rooted in Reagan Era conservatism. Gates cites how the white male action hero's body was the site of a "crisis in masculinity." The white male action heroes body was constantly put through the ringer throughout these movies showcasing how resilient he could be during times of change. Gates states how:

"...the white male body in the 1980s cop action film offered a site upon which masculine crisis— personal and often national— could be expressed and resolved through action,

beatings, and eventual defeat of the enemy, whether international terrorists, African Americans, or women.”⁹¹

In contrast, the Black characters of these buddy cop’s films masculinity was placed into “protective custody”⁹² according to Ed Guerrero. Black actors and actresses rarely had top billing in popular American cinema at the time. When films would feature Black stars, they were typically relegated to supporting roles alongside white actors and actresses. They were often used as comedic relief or somehow depicted as less competent than their white counterparts in some way. This is seen in *Lethal Weapon*’s Murtaugh initially the script did not specifically mention Murtaugh’s “ethnicity”, according to the director Donner.⁹³ Murtaugh, is the older wiser officer of the pair, yet it is constantly suggested that he is not as competent as Riggs when it comes to the physical aspect of policing, for instance he is not a great shooter or fighter at hand to hand combat. There is a ‘post-racial’ ideal to the casting and relationship between Riggs and Murtaugh. Race was not mentioned in the casting of the role nor is it really discussed in the films. Yet, Murtaugh, falls into the “protective custody” of Riggs; he is a slightly bumbling police officer who needs Riggs virility to get the job done, just as much as Riggs needs Murtaugh’s clear-headedness to actually put the case together. These films were genre pushing in their action sequences, musical choices, and production budgets, but they maintained the status quo of American ideas of race and masculinity.

In 1987 Danny Glover, the actor who portrayed Roger Murtaugh in the *Lethal Weapon* franchise was asked if he felt there would be an increase in roles for Black actors in the

⁹¹ Ibid 80, 135.

⁹² Ibid 80.

⁹³ Eyes on Cinema. “Lethal Weapon press conference w/ Mel Gibson, Danny Glover & Richard Donner from 1987.” 15, May. 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9-p1VFjAbA>.

upcoming years. Glover was optimistic about the opportunities that Black actors were receiving, he considered the issue to be rather fluid, because the state of African-Americans in the U.S. was constantly changing, hopefully the roles would reflect that.⁹⁴ The roles for Black actors and actresses would continue to increase exponentially within the police film genre well into the 1990s and the early 2000s. According to Jared Sexton, nearly every major Black actor in the post-civil rights era of American film,

“has made this professional rite of passage as officer, detective, sergeant lieutenant, or chief. All have played roles as either a cop or a soldier and the lion’s share have earned their reputations and largest paydays in such roles.”⁹⁵

For Black actors in the police film genre, the issue has not been the quantity of roles, but rather the quality of the roles. In the 1990s the Black detective character stepped out of the “protective custody” of a white male co-lead and was able to take top-billing in police films. Black actors such as Morgan Freeman, Denzel Washington, and Samuel L. Jackson appeared in multiple police partner-centric films over the course of the 1990s and received top-billing. Gates suggests that there was a hand-off from the 1980s to the 1990s in the co-stars of the film. In the 1980s, there was a reliance on a white male partner to provide a sense of identification for white audiences. When films featured a Black lead in the 1990s the Black detective adopted a white female sidekick, the Black character was in the lead but still remained isolated from his community within the films, such as 1993’s *The Pelican Brief* and 1995’s *Devil in a Blue Dress*.

⁹⁴ Ibid 93.

⁹⁵ Jared, Sexton. “The Ruse of Engagement: Black Masculinity and the Cinema of Policing.” *American Quarterly* Vol. 61, No. 1 (Mar., 2009), pp. 39-63 (25 pages). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27734975>.

The Hollywood detective film has remained relevant in American popular culture because,

“issues and themes explored in the genre are central to contemporary American society; and second, the genre is infinitely flexible in adapting to itself to changing social and cultural conditions.”⁹⁶

The genre has transformed as the decades has progressed, but some things have remained the same, the focus on masculinity and whiteness. The films have featured violent interactions between the police characters and the witnesses and suspects. In the later 2000s there were several films that began to challenge these conventions. Some films were focused on the major American cities such as Los Angeles and New York City, but others expanded outwards focusing on cities that were not often featured on film in relation to the buddy-cop genre.

The first is the *Bad Boys* franchise (1995, 2003, 2019) starring comedians and television sitcom stars Martin Lawrence and Will Smith and the second is the *Rush Hour* franchise (1998, 2001, 2007) starring Hong Kong martial artist Jackie Chan and stand-up comedian Chris Tucker. Both franchises were quite popular and went onto produce multiple sequels and globe-trotting action and adventure, while starring two non-white lead actors. These franchises brought the buddy-cop-action-comedy into the early 2000s and showcased changing ideals of masculinity within male action stars along with the shifting expectations of Black actors in the police genre. With the expansion of the buddy-cop-action-comedy franchise space was made to include women and pushed them into leading roles as seen in 2013’s *The Heat*. *Bad Boys II* and *The Heat* are both buddy-cop-action-comedies that show the progression of the genre, highlighting

⁹⁶ Philippa Gates. “Introduction.” In *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film*. University of New York Press. 2006. 8

that two Black men and two women can lead these films and audiences will flock to the box offices to see them, while also highlighting for every progression made in the genre the films still have troublesome depictions of policing.

CHAPTER THREE: *BAD BOYS II* INDUSTRIAL AND TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The Rise of *Bad Boys*

1995's *Bad Boys* was the film directorial debut of action director Michael Bay; at the time Bay was known for directing Nike shoe commercials and music videos. Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer noticed untapped potential in the director and asked him to direct *Bad Boys*. Simpson and Bruckheimer were the visionary producers who took ahold of the action film genre in the 1980s and gave it a 'slickness'⁹⁷ that had not been seen in the genre in previous decades. This style of shooting would continue into the 1990s. *Bad Boys* was initially set to star *Saturday Night Live* (1975-) alumni's Dana Carvey and Jon Lovitz, featuring a goofy and sophomoric tone. But during pre-production there were scheduling conflicts and script issues.⁹⁸ Eventually, Carvey and Lovitz had to leave the project and the studio went onto hire two Black sitcom actors; Martin Lawrence and Will Smith. At the time, Lawrence and Smith were the cheaper options, Lawrence was riding the high off the success of his television sitcom *Martin* (1992-1997) and Will Smith was known for his role in NBC's *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996) and his rap career.

Bad Boys was not the film debuts for either actor but, it was still quite early on in their film careers. The production of the first film was rife with complications according to Bay,

⁹⁷ James, Kendrick. "A Genre of Its Own: From Westerns, to Vigilantes, to Pure Action." *In A Companion to the Action Film*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.: 2019. 49.

⁹⁸ Claudia, Eller. "'Boys' won't be on schedule." January 7. 1993. *The Hollywood Reporter*. <https://variety.com/1993/film/news/boys-won-t-be-boys-on-schedule-102766/>

“I know the studio didn't believe in our movie,” he said. “They didn't treat us very well at all and we were just kind of on our own. They gave us \$10,000 for a rewrite and I don't know what you get for \$10,000. So we had to make a lot [of] the stuff up.”⁹⁹

Because of budget constraints on the first film Bay had to cut the film in a particular way,

“They all said, 'You can't cut that fast.' I'm like, 'Well, I am.' And now you see it imitated, but way back when I was cutting fast for a reason...to hide the cheap art direction and to give it some energy.”¹⁰⁰

The chemistry between Smith and Lawrence, which is the focal point of the film, was organically fostered between the actors. Up until around the production of *Bad Boys*, Smith was mostly known for his rap music career, along with the success of his NBC hit television series *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. The show was in its fourth season around the time of production for *Bad Boys*. *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* had been a breakout hit for Smith, further pushing him into mainstream, or “cross-over,” success. Smith’s music career featured tasteful rap lyrics that rarely featured the racially charged and sexually explicit lyrics that dominated ‘gangster’ rap music at the time. This coupled with the fact that Smith’s acting on *Bel-Air* had attracted the attention of both Black *and* white audience members made him an appealing grab for Sony Pictures. Smith’s co-star Martin Lawrence had a different succession to television fame than Smith. Lawrence was a stand-up comedian who had been featured in films geared towards predominately young Black audiences. His self-titled television series, *Martin*, was on FOX, a part of their line-up that was geared towards audiences of color. Smith’s ‘cross-over’ attracted

⁹⁹ Erik Davis. “Interview: Michael Bay on How ‘Bad Boys,’ ‘The Rock’ And ‘Armageddon’ Helped Shape Him as a Filmmaker.” June 21. 2017. *Fandango.com*.
<https://www.fandango.com/movie-news/interview-michael-bay-on-how-bad-boys-the-rock-and-armageddon-helped-shape-him-as-a-filmmaker-752403>.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid 99.

white and Black audiences into the theaters while Lawrence's appearance insured that Black audiences would stay to watch.

The script was in rough shape leading Smith and Lawrence to improvise many of their lines. The star quality chemistry between the leading actors would be the tent-pole for the franchise, though, initially, Sony Pictures, was reluctant to produce a film starring two Black actors. "[The studio] didn't believe in that movie because a movie with two black stars [had] never worked around the world."¹⁰¹ *Bad Boys* would go onto gross \$141 million dollars worldwide,¹⁰² and according to Bay, was one of the first films to star two Black leads that successfully crossed over into foreign markets.¹⁰³ *Bad Boys* was such a success that it launched the film careers of Will Smith and Martin Lawrence, and it cemented Bay, whether critics liked it or not, as an auteur of the action film genre.

Bad Boys would take after other buddy-cop-action-comedies of the 1980s and 1990s by turning into a profitable Hollywood juggernaut. The film spawned two sequels (2003, 2019) and a spin-off television series; *L.A.'s Finest*, 2019-2020, in a similar trajectory that *Lethal Weapon* and *Rush Hour* had. The franchise takes place in Miami, Florida and follows Marcus Burnett (Lawrence) and Mike Lowery (Smith) as two Miami police officers part of the Tactical Narcotics Unit (TNT,) who are tasked with investigating drug trafficking cases within the jurisdiction of Miami. Throughout the franchise audiences can expect intense action scenes, 'bloated' car chases, gratuitous depictions of scantily-clad women, excursions across U.S. borders, and a significant dose of humor from the lead actors. Surrounding the lead detectives is a diverse cast

¹⁰¹ Ibid 99.

¹⁰² "Bad Boys (1995)". *Box Office Mojo by IMDbPro*.
https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt0112442/?ref=bo_rl_ti

¹⁰³ Ibid 99.

of actors and actresses of Black and Latinx descent, which is fitting for the Miami location. *Bad Boys* introduces the audience to Lowery and Burnett, two wise-cracking detectives who find themselves tied up in a murder investigation and a robbery. A \$100 million dollars' worth of heroin is stolen from the police department and the detectives investigate the robbery and solve the murder of a call girl who Lowery has a past with. The investigation causes them to switch identities as they have to earn the trust of another call girl who witnessed the murder of her friend and has information about the robbery. The film features fast-paced dialogue and explosive car chases with humor arising from Lowery and Burnett's clearly divergent lifestyles, as demonstrated by the pair assuming the other's identity. The franchise follows the typical beats of its buddy-cop-action-comedy predecessors, including an odd couple dynamic between the leading characters that is heightened by the drastic and outlandish circumstances that the characters find themselves in.

This dynamic is back to an even greater degree in the film's sequel. *Bad Boys II* returns to Miami with Burnett and Lowery. The partners investigate a Cuban drug lord, Johnny Tapia (Jordi Mollà), who is trafficking ecstasy pills into Miami. The police officers are assigned the case after a drug bust goes wrong at a Klu Klux Klan (KKK) rally. After that the partners must discover where the drugs are coming from. Burnett's younger sister, Syd (Gabrielle Union), who Lowery is interested in exploring a romantic relationship with, is a young Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent who is embedded in Tapia's operations intent to bring him down as her first big bust on the job. The film ends with the partners in Cuba attempting to rescue Syd after Tapia learns that she is undercover as a federal agent and flees the country, holding her hostage. Burnett and Lowery capture Syd, and engage in a car chase with Tapia through the hills of Cuba, crashing through homes of Cuban residents. Eventually they crash land on the U.S.

Army base Guantanamo Bay. Burnett shoots Tapia in the head, to the approval of Lowery, and the film closes on Burnett and Lowery together enjoying each other's company stateside at Burnett's home.

Being Buddies and *Bad Boys*

Lethal Weapon's influence is seen throughout the *Bad Boys* franchise, especially in the personality traits of the lead characters. For instance, Burnett is akin to Danny Glover's Murtaugh. Burnett is a family man – father of three, married to his high school sweetheart, and has a home in the suburbs. Burnett is always grouching about how he has actual responsibilities to his family, unlike his partner. Lowery's character is the volatile, 'shoot first and ask questions later' character of the pair, akin to Mel Gibson's Riggs. Lowery is not depicted as emotionally unstable due to a family tragedy like Riggs was in *Lethal Weapon*. More so, his character is temperamental as opposed to emotionally devastated. Riggs preferred to engage in hand-to-hand combat with his enemies while Lowery prefers to shoot anyone who is considered a threat. Burnett is depicted as hopelessly ineffectual at his job, then Murtaugh ever was, over the course of the franchise. Burnett, is entirely reluctant at times to use his weapon which is in direct contrast to Lowery who is always prepared to fire his weapon. Murtaugh was considered to be a clerically competent detective, but Burnett does not even appear to have that skill going for him. Throughout the films, Burnett's policing style is a somewhat less violent version of Lowery's. Lowery's style of policing and lifestyle choices harken back to that of the Blaxploitation characters of the 1970s, for example Shaft. Like Shaft, Lowery is a womanizer and enjoys the thrills of busting criminals and going toe-to-toe with suspects.

The dynamic between Lowery and Burnett defers from the relationship dynamics featured in *Lethal Weapon* and even the *Rush Hour* franchise because Lowery and Burnett are

childhood friends who chose to join the force together and made a vow to each other in high school: “We ride together, we die together, bad boys for life.” This vow is quoted throughout the franchise in moments that are meant to garner emotional weight between the characters and it is also the title of the third film in the franchise. The lived-in relationship between the partners makes the bantering between the characters more pronounced. Lowery and Burnett share a dynamic similar to previous buddy-cop-action-comedy franchises due to their choices in policing styles. Buddy-cop action-comedies prefer a heightened style of policing that is all comedy with zero regards for consequences. This is followed in the *Bad Boys* films, particularly in the sequel.

Throughout *Bad Boys II*, Burnett is continuously repeating that he intends to retire soon; something that he actually follows through with in the franchise’s third film. Lowery always huffs and rolls his eyes at the statement, stating how Burnett is all talk and is never going to retire. This discussion contributes to another discussion that undercuts a lot of the action within the film, which is Burnett’s criticism of Lowery’s policing style. Burnett is the less competent police officer of the pair. One of the many sources of humor between the partners is that in a fire fight he is somewhat worthless, until Lowery’s jibes get under his skin, and he steps up and shoots back at the targets. Burnett repeatedly mentions that Lowery is a hothead whose, shoot first and ask questions second, mentality is hindering their actual police investigation. Lowery usually scoffs and writes the criticisms off as Burnett being his goofy self, yet Burnett’s criticisms of Lowery are actually well-founded and have merit over the course of the film. Lowery *is* a hot-headed police officer, who *does* prefer to shoot a suspect if they do not immediately comply with his orders. Lowery, like some officers in real life, does not display proper de-escalation techniques, which within the film often result in drawn out car chase and gun shootout scenes.

Bad Boys II was described as a “mind-boggling, nerve-numbing, adrenaline-pumping combination of shock-and-awe brilliance and idiocy,” from Manhola Dargis, *Los Angeles Times* film critic.¹⁰⁴ This review is in line with other reviews of the sequel. Often criticism would denounce the long winded run time of the film (which is 144-minutes), the action scenes (critics considered the scenes to be overstuffed), and the acting of the lead characters (Dargis stated point blank that Lawrence could not act).¹⁰⁵ The reviews for this film are typical for films directed by action film auteur Michael Bay and *Bad Boys II* features many other tent poles of Bay’s other action films.¹⁰⁶ There is an acute reliance on fast cars, glorification of violence, leering gazes at women, and multiple displays of how the American military has become a part of the Hollywood filmmaking experience.

Lowery and Burnett’s style of policing is right at home within this fantastical world that Bay and company have created for audiences. The 144-minute film could easily be written off as popcorn fodder for audiences, a mindless sequel to a taste-less film franchise. Some of these things may be true for *Bad Boys II*, but it must be highlighted, that like several other films following police officers, it can inform American and global audiences on how policing functions domestically and globally.

Before *Bad Boys*

The *Bad Boys* franchise comes from a long tradition of Black police officers in criminal and police fiction. *Bad Boys* is not the first film franchise to feature Black police officers, but it is one of the first mainstream Hollywood successes of a franchise with two leading Black actors

¹⁰⁴ Manhola Dargis. “When mayhem is all that matters.” July 18. 2003. *The Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-jul-18-et-dargis18-story.html>

¹⁰⁵ Ibid 104.

¹⁰⁶ “Michael Bay” *Rottentomatoes.com*. https://www.rottentomatoes.com/celebrity/michael_bay

as police officers acquiring domestic and international acclaim.¹⁰⁷ The depictions and character choices of Burnett and Lowery in *Bad Boys II* are rooted in previous iterations of Black police officers onscreen.

The first Black detective on-screen was in R.W. Phillips's *A Black Sherlock Holmes* (1918).¹⁰⁸ At the time Black characters on screen faced the same troubles as Black characters in criminal fiction, they were often relegated to side characters and behaved stereotypically. White authors and directors depicted Black characters as nothing but ignorant comic relief for their white counterparts. This would change with one of the most popular and well received depictions of a Black police officer in the 20th century as seen in 1969's *In the Heat of the Night*, starring Sidney Poitier as Virgil Tibbs.¹⁰⁹ Virgil Tibbs quickly became one of the most recognizable Black police officers in police fiction and he showcased to American audiences that Black police officers were competent at their jobs and were able to protect and serve communities, even communities that may not want to be protected by Black people.

In the 1970s, Black sleuths and police officers appeared in racially-charged Blaxploitation films. Characters such as Shaft, a private investigator, who had little regard for abiding by the law due to a determination to get the job done by any means necessary for his clients, proliferated the genre and Black audiences flooded movie theaters to watch the films. Shaft was an adept criminologist, marksmen, and investigator, all the while accurately talking the language of the streets of Harlem. Shaft also bucked against the villainous white figures in his

¹⁰⁷ Jeremy Fuster. "3 Reasons Why 'Bad Boys for Life' Blew Up the Box Office." January 19, 2020. *TheWrap.com*. <https://www.thewrap.com/3-reasons-why-bad-boys-for-life-blew-up-the-box-office/>

¹⁰⁸ Philippa Gates. "Always a Partner in Crime." *Journal of Popular Film & Television*. Issue 32, Vol. 1. 2004. doi:10.3200/JPFT.32.1.20-30. 20.

¹⁰⁹ Richard Schickel. "Two Pros in a Super Sleeper." July 28, 1967. Vol. 63, No. 4. *Life Magazine*. Time Inc. 10.

life and always came out on top. Blaxploitation characters, like Shaft, were often heavily sexualized. Part of Shaft's appeal was that he was a womanizer and always had a plethora of women at his disposal, similar to the white private investigator, Mike Hammer of the 1940s. Though Shaft was one of the genre's most popular private investigators, Blaxploitation films also depicted actual police officers and detectives.

1970's *Cotton Comes to Harlem*¹¹⁰ features two Black NYPD detectives who are tasked with investigating a "Reverend", who is telling Harlem residents if they donate money to his campaign they will be saved a seat on his ship the "Black Beauty," that is sailing back to Africa. The two detectives solve the crime with their pragmatism and wit, quickly recognizing the "Reverend" for the conman that he is. The detectives are efficient at their jobs, while their white colleagues are visibly incompetent police officers. In a reversal of dominant American cinema at the time, the white characters provide the comic relief for the film. *Cotton Comes to Harlem* is a fascinating entry in the Blaxploitation film genre and it showcases how diminished the role of Black police officers in the greater genre of police film would become in the 1980s. Instead of being competent and independent police officers, they would turn into the comedic relief for their white counterparts.

Films featuring Black police officers and private investigators also mirrored the increase of Black people joining law enforcement across the U.S. In the 1970s as Black people, along with other marginalized groups, acquired more civil rights, Black people's role in law enforcement increased.

¹¹⁰ "Cotton Comes to Harlem (1970)." IMDb.com. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0065579/>

“The 1970s ushered in a significant increase in African American officers as a result of Supreme Court decisions, governmental reports, Congressional legislation, and the formation of Black police unions.”¹¹¹

Due to an increase in civil rights for Black Americans, ushering in an increase of Black people joining the police force in real life, the media adapted to reflect the change and there was an increase in onscreen depictions of Black officers.

As of 2013, 20% of U.S. metropolitan police officers are of Black/African-American descent.¹¹² This statistic mirrors the representation of Black police officers in film. In a study by Franklin T. Wilson and Howard Henderson the pair analyzed 112 films from the police film genre that were released from 1971 to 2011, to show the racial breakdown of characters in the films. In the films white officers were the leads or the co-leads of the films 89% of the time.¹¹³ Black actors appeared in about 20% of the films which reflects the real life percentage of Black officers in the U.S.¹¹⁴ When paired with a white police officer, only 4% of the time were the Black officers featured in a non-comedic light.¹¹⁵ Because the Black community historically has had a tense and fraught relationship with police and other law enforcement agencies, Black people who join the force tend to experience a “double marginality.”¹¹⁶ Black police officers feel unaccepted by their white colleagues and feel marginalized within their own communities, some of the very communities that they are required to “protect and serve.” Within the Black

¹¹¹ Franklin T. Wilson and Howard Henderson. “The Criminological Cultivation of African American Municipal Police Officers: Sambo or Sellout.” *Race and Justice*. Vol. 4, Issue. 1. 2014. Pp. 45-67. 48.

¹¹² Ibid 111. 47

¹¹³ Ibid 111. 55

¹¹⁴ Ibid 111. 55

¹¹⁵ Ibid 111. 58.

¹¹⁶ Ibid 111. 48.

Community Black officers can be viewed as selling out or “Uncle Tom-ing.”¹¹⁷ According to James Baldwin, in his seminal film criticism text published in 1976 “A Devil Finds Work”, Baldwin highlights the relationship that the Black community has with Black officers, “Blacks know something about black cops...They know that their presence on the force doesn’t change the force or the judges or the lawyers or the bondsmen or the jails.”¹¹⁸ For Baldwin some of the officers that he feared the most in his neighborhoods as a child were Black police officers. He knew the pressure Black police officers faced within their departments and that drove them to react harsher in hopes of proving themselves to their colleagues.¹¹⁹ This topic even finds itself mentioned in the buddy-cop-action-comedies of the 1990s. In passing Chris Tucker’s character in *Rush Hour* mentions that his own mother is ashamed to say that he is a member of the LAPD to her friends, instead she says he is a drug dealer. This self-awareness permeates some of the buddy-cop-action-comedies, but it does not necessarily find itself in *Bad Boys II*. Bay and company take a non-critical stance towards police aggression with civilians; a stance that some could glean as pro-cop.

Bad Boys II is somewhat conscious that it is centered around two Black police officers. Lowery’s and Burnett’s race serves to work as a good cover at times when interacting with their suspects. In one scene where the officers are tailing two of Tapia’s henchmen in bumper to bumper traffic, the henchmen do not even consider that they could be police officers, rather they identify them as “gangbanger homies.” Other than that instance, Burnett and Lowery are immediately identified as police officers by their suspects. Due to the film being set in Miami, Lowery and Burnett interact with a diverse cast of people, their coworkers and the criminals they

¹¹⁷ Ibid 111. 49.

¹¹⁸ James Baldwin. *The Devil Finds Work*. Dial Press. 1976. 56-62.

¹¹⁹ Ibid 118.

investigate are white, Black, and Latinx. *Bad Boys II* depicts the Latinx community in a stereotypical way. Burnett and Lowery are surrounded by Latinx police officers who they jokingly exchange racist stereotypes with. The Latinx detectives make fun of Lowery and Burnett for being Black. Burnett and Lowery make fun of the Cuban detectives for being Latinx. The film features other harmful racist stereotypes of Latinx people as drug dealers and money hungry individuals, aspects that are unfortunately common in the action film genre. Because Lowery and Burnett are the two Black leads of the film, they are not placed in “protective custody”¹²⁰ of a white officer, though their superior is a white officer, Burnett and Lowery are not isolated from the Black community in the film. As a police film, *Bad Boys II* is not entirely self-aware of the relationship Lowery and Burnett have as Black police officers with the predominantly Black and Latinx community that is served. *Bad Boys II* may struggle with the racial identity politics of its lead characters yet, it does not hesitate to showcase of hyper-aggressive and hyper-masculine styles of policing.

Throughout *Bad Boys II* there is a running commentary on Lowery’s flashy style of policing. Burnett is frustrated with his partner’s shoot first and ask questions later style; yes, it does serve to protect the officers when the moment calls for it, but it poses a risk to actually performing their jobs efficiently. Phrases such as “dead suspects can’t say shit” and “trigger Mike strikes again” are uttered in contempt by Burnett after the conclusion of two separate shoot-outs and find themselves dealing with yet another collection of dead bodies. Lowery is the clear perpetrator of this impulsive and violent style of policing which is often depicted in other buddy- cop action-comedies. That is not to say that Burnett does not also fall into the trap

¹²⁰ Guerrero, Ed. “Chapter 15: The Black Image in Protective Custody: Hollywood’s Biracial Buddy Films of the Eighties.” From *Black American Cinema*. Routledge: New York and London. 1993. 239.

himself. Burnett finds himself lashing out at suspects and witnesses when his anger is triggered and he feels personally affronted by the situation escalating so dangerously. Three scenes showcase this dynamic in the film.

Being *Bad Boys*

The opening scene showcases the work of multiple branches of the U.S. military attempting to intercept a drug bust. This scene is setting the stage for how the drugs, which at times function like their own character in the film, are getting into U.S. territory. The next scene functions as a character introduction for the stars of the film. Lowery and Burnett are suiting up as they head out to a drug bust with their fellow TNT officers. The unit is infiltrating a KKK rally in order to intercept the delivery of ecstasy pills. Burnett and Lowery are actually dressed in the robes of the Klan members. In a big reveal they both unveil themselves as Black men, the shot occurs in slow motion and has the camera facing up towards Lowery with his arms spread in an image mirroring a Christ-like figure. Lowery holds a gun in each hand with the burning cross in the background. Burnett and Lowery reveal themselves facing back to back giving the audiences the first glimpse of the characters in the film with the partner's theme playing in the background; a mixture of a hip-hop beat with theatrical violins. The camera pans around showcasing the awe as the Klan members see Burnett and Lowery for the first time.

According to scholars Carrie Rickey, Ron Tamborini, and James Stiff, an audience's enjoyment of action films is rooted in their enjoyment of suspense. Suspense is usually invoked in audiences when there is an anticipation of events that could either hurt or benefit the protagonist of the film. The suspense arises out of the struggle that is happening between the protagonist(s) and other characters. Audiences become concerned whether or not the protagonist(s) will come out on the other side okay, the ultimate enjoyment comes when the

protagonist(s) succeeds.¹²¹ The camera pans around showcasing two Black police officers at a KKK rally. Through a drastic opposition that is obvious to an audience, it is clear to someone watching this film that there is a tension between the two groups. It is not just a criminal versus a police officer; it is a white supremacist versus a Black man – Americans on completely opposite spectrums of life. The writing staff and the production team, through dialogue and visual cues, set up a clear moment to draw suspense from.

The moment is somewhat of a revenge-fantasy for the Black police officers. Two Black men at a KKK rally with their guns at the ready aiming towards the very people who think the absolute worst of them. This scene calls forth moments from Blaxploitation films of the 1970's where the Black characters were able to triumph and one-up the white man for once in American cinema. The KKK members are visibly startled by Burnett and Lowery revealing themselves, causing Burnett and Lowery to feel as if they have the upper hand over the KKK members; and in this moment they do. The Klan members have been caught off guard and have guns aimed at them. But quickly the dynamics shift again, one of Klan members takes Burnett in a chokehold aiming a gun at his head. The situation immediately escalates, Lowery is quickly prepared to shoot the suspect in order to retrieve Burnett alive. A tense, but humorous, back and forth is exchanged between the Klan member, who maintains a hold on Burnett. Lowery deliberates whether or not he should actually shoot the Klan member in his head, Burnett provides humor to the scene commentating on Lowery and the Klan members tense standoff. Humor finds itself at the center of action sequences in action films.

¹²¹ Cynthia King; editor James Kendrick. "Comedy in Action" in *A Companion to the Action Film*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.: 2019. 142-143.

For some films it is not “compartmentalized into separate lighthearted moments but rather is directly injected into distressing violence and peril.” The humor, “does more than just serve as isolated comic respites from the more intense action scenes.”¹²²

This style of humor can be used in two ways by the protagonist(s) and antagonist in action comedies. Firstly, it can be used to “defend or intensify”¹²³ the aggressive behavior displayed by the characters. Sometimes the odds are against the protagonist(s) of the film and the only thing that can provide a shield against imminent danger is a moment of humor¹²⁴ Burnett is currently in a defense-less position as he is being held in a chokehold with a gun placed to his head by a criminal. His attempt at deescalating a dangerous situation is intended to provide humorous respite.

The second way humor can be used is to establish superiority over another character this is similar to intensifying a moment.¹²⁵ If a character is making fun of a violent situation it almost immediately establishes a hierarchy within the moment.

“The humor found in action films, therefore, may not only establish the aggressor’s superiority over the disparaged and brutalized victims but also stimulate feelings of mastery and superiority among the audience members themselves.”¹²⁶

Lowery falls into this category in this scene, his tense barbs with the Klan member are establishing dominance over the moment. He is ensuring Burnett and the Klan member that he will prevail in this moment. The Klan member proudly states “white power” and in response Lowery emphatically responds with “blue power,” showcasing his allegiance is not with his race,

¹²² Ibid 121, 144.

¹²³ Ibid 121, 144.

¹²⁴ Ibid 121, 144.

¹²⁵ Ibid 121, 145.

¹²⁶ Ibid 121, 145.

but his occupation. Burnett sees the situation quickly getting out of hand and attempts to deescalate by politely asking them to resolve the issue. Lowery angrily cuts off Burnett and states that Burnett came into the operation “prepared to die,” Burnett emphatically denies this claim. Lowery further exclaims that he is not like his partner who prefers “new age” tactics – which are simply attempts to calmly resolve a situation – and that he “prefers shooting motherfuckers.” This causes the Klan members to grumble and move around the burning cross. Lowery gets even angrier, stating that he is “too unstable” for this, demanding everyone back up and stand still. One of the Klan members shoots first and the shootout begins. Lowery is seen rolling in the dirt while shooting at the suspects in a callback to Martin Riggs shooting style from *Lethal Weapon*. Lowery is a sharp-shooter taking out suspects left and right. His aim is so accurate that he shoots through Burnett’s buttocks in order to kill a Klan member. This occurs in slow motion and shows the bullet going in and out of Burnett’s buttocks and into the Klan member’s head to apply the fatal shot. The scene concludes revealing that the bust only came back with two bags of ecstasy. Fellow TNT members angrily state how that was “a lot of cop work” for a measly bust. Lowery scoffs and tells them that he will worry about his “snitch.” Lowery caused the most damage and it was because of his source that the operation ended up being a bust.

This introduction sets the tone for the film, re-introducing or introducing the characters to audience members, while establishing the stakes for the lead characters. Michael Bay’s high-action and fast-paced editing and directorial style is immediately established as well as his tendency to push the limits of his characters, for example, placing two Black police officers at a KKK rally in the swamps of South Florida. Bay also showcases the personalities of the character’s quite well in the scene, audiences can easily identify who is the hot-head and who is

the more level-headed of the pair. This is further revealed in the scenes that follow. As Burnett is airlifted to a hospital, he recites a speech that Lowery is able to mouth along with, hinting to the audience that this is a discussion that they have often, about how Burnett has responsibilities to his family, and does not have a “trust fund” unlike Lowery. Burnett urges Lowery to attend therapy because it would help him be more grounded in his police work instead of jumping to shoot first. Lowery exclaims that he was mandated to attend therapy after he “shot up a bunch of people at the airport” further proving that Lowery is a hazard to the department and others. Lowery considers Burnett’s attempt at deescalating situations as “spiritual new age bullshit.” The line in their policing styles has clearly been drawn for the rest of the film.

The second scene that displays the diverging policing attitudes of Burnett and Lowery is a car chase that takes viewers through a high intensity car pursuit that occurs within the first thirty minutes of the 144-minute film. The chase takes audiences through the streets of Miami involving tractor-trailers, helicopters, muscle and sports cars. For some films this scene would come at the conclusion, but for Bay, this is only the tip of the iceberg. The scene is nearly ten minutes long and can be split into two parts. Like most other aspects of the film it appears to be another superficial buddy cop action scene, but underneath it is revealing how violence and humor have come to function within the buddy-cop-action-comedy.

The car chase begins moments after Burnett’s younger sister, Syd, is attacked in a botched robbery by Haitian “pirates” who want the money that she was delivering to Tapia. What the pirates do not know is that Syd is an undercover DEA agent that is working to take down Tapia’s operation. The attempted robbery is not only dangerous for her safety, but it also jeopardizes her position as an undercover operative. Burnett and Lowery are following a tip from Lowery’s “snitch” it is how they end up in the melee of the car chase. They are trying to protect

Syd from the pirates and understand what is happening within their city. The first half of the car chase has Lowery driving his Porsche along local through-way streets of Miami while just barely avoiding bullets. He encourages Burnett to shoot back but once again there is a divergence in policing style between the two. Burnett attempts to commandeer the situation by showing the pirates, who are shooting and creating maximum destruction on the streets of Miami, his police badge. Lowery is aghast with Burnett and demands he just shoot the suspects, Lowery ends up having to shoot the suspect who Burnett was trying to show his badge to, then sarcastically states that now Burnett can show his badge. This is a quick back and forth, but, once again establishes the diverging attitudes in policing. Lowery is obviously going to be more inclined to react harshly to Burnett attempting to deescalate the situation because his attention is placed elsewhere. Lowery, is irritated that his partner cannot follow the rules of an action film: the driver-drives and the shooter-shoots. Burnett is not performing accordingly. This irritation can make the viewer wonder, why is Lowery so keen on keeping Burnett as his partner, when they perform their jobs under different philosophies?

The two partners are eventually forced to park their car and join other Miami police officers in a gun fight against the pirates. There are casualties on both sides of the fight, but some of the pirates are able to escape and the second half of the chase commences. The pirates now in a tractor-trailer and on the tail of Syd's SUV with Lowery gaining on them in his Porsche. The last half of the chase turns into a huge spectacle where the pirates begin unhooking the cars that are attached to the trailer, causing them to fly at Lowery and Burnett. It quickly turns into a game of evasion creating huge explosions, turned over cars, cars being thrown over other cars, and bullets flying against the backdrop of a sunny Miami day. This scene demonstrates a particular style of violence that finds itself in blockbuster action productions. Henry Giroux states that

there are three types of violence that appear in action films. One being ritualistic violence, which is classified as “pure spectacle in form and superficial in content.”¹²⁷ Giroux suggests that this style of violence is “campy, self-indulgent, and masturbatory.”¹²⁸ Ritualistic violence is not intended to arise a critical response from an audience. It is instead meant to be championed and celebrated just as it is by the protagonist(s) of the film. The ritualistic style of violence is on full display in the high speed chase across the city of Miami. Burnett being the passenger in the car quickly becomes the mouth-piece for the audience in this scene. He is completely distracted and unable to shoot at the pirates because he is in genuine awe of the situation that Lowery and himself are in. The chase concludes with Syd safely evading the pirates allowing Burnett and Lowery to catch up with her. Burnett and Lowery return back to the police station fully prepared to be disciplined by their captain. Just like the beginning of the film Burnett and Lowery have performed a lot of “cop work” and nothing to show for it. No evidence was collected from the chase, no suspects apprehended, and only a little intel was collected from Syd about the case, but twenty-two vehicles were damaged, along with one boat. Once again there was maximum damage with little reward.

The third scene is another shootout that displays the diverging policing attitudes of Burnett and Lowery, this scene shows the true implications of how it can be destructive to their police work and the emotional toll that it has on Burnett. The shootout is important because it has Lowery’s pro-cop bravado on full display, but it is the moments that lead up to the shootout that provide a poignant reflection on why Lowery is so hyper-aggressive with his suspects. Burnett and Lowery are frustrated with each other and Lowery questions that if a “crackhead” were to

¹²⁷ Giroux, Henry. “Racism and the Aesthetic of Hyperreal Violence: Pulp Fiction and Other Visual Tragedies.” *Social Identities* Vol.1 No. 2 (1995), pp. 333-354.

¹²⁸ Ibid 127.

attack him that Burnett would “smoke” them. Burnett admits that he would shoot them in the leg and effectively deescalate the situation. Lowery guffaws at this and calls his response “bullshit.” Then in a surprisingly on point monologue Burnett breaks down why Lowery is so aggressive. Burnett states that Lowery has anger issues that he takes out on suspects because of latent maternal issues. Unfortunately, Lowery misses the entire point of the moment and states that Burnett can never talk about his mother again. Burnett rolls his eyes at the statement, noting how Lowery completely missed the purpose of his speech. The scene is intended for laughs wrapped in pseudo-psychology, but looking past it there is legitimate truth to what Burnett is saying about Lowery. It has been demonstrated multiple times at this point in the film that Lowery is angry and does prefer to express it through his police work, which often involves shootouts and car chases. This is a tension that police officers in real life experience. Some police officers that have civil complaints against them are known to have had multiple infractions in the past and have a history of violent behavior.¹²⁹ *Bad Boys II* is a fantastical action adventure, but there are moments of reality in the story as well.

The scene proceeds into yet another shootout between Burnett and Lowery who are attempting to understand how the Haitian pirates caught wind of the money exchange between Syd and Tapia. The pirates are angry with the officers and a tense stand-off begins with Lowery and Burnett on one side of a wall while the pirates are trapped on the other side. The camera pans through the doorways and holes in the wall showing how both parties are merely separated by plaster. The pirate states how Lowery is in his house and he demands that the officers get out. While Lowery argues that they are in his “country” and he can do whatever it is that he wants.

¹²⁹ Jill McCorkel. “Police officers accused of brutal violence often have a history of complaints by citizens.” May 31, 2020. *Theconversation.com* <https://theconversation.com/police-officers-accused-of-brutal-violence-often-have-a-history-of-complaints-by-citizens-139709>

The pirates immediately begin shooting back at them. Burnett, once again attempts to deescalate the situation by calmly shouting that they are not “immigration”, the pirates ignore him and continue shooting. Lowery shouts how they cannot hear him because they are too busy shooting. Burnett is cornered by the bullets into the bathroom and spends the entirety of the shootout trapped next to the toilet, further showcasing his role as comedic relief by placing him in an embarrassing position. The scene concludes with Lowery killing every suspect in the room except one.

Lowery and Burnett begin to interrogate the witness but in a role reversal Burnett is the one unable to control his anger. He begins kicking and beating the suspect out of frustration with the shootout. Lowery simply stands there in both confusion and bafflement at Burnett’s outburst. The partners begin their interrogation of the single standing suspect, but not without Burnett noting how they could have gotten more information if Lowery did not kill the other witnesses stating how “dead suspects can’t say shit.” The interrogation proves fruitless and the only evidence they gather is a video camera that has footage of Tapia’s home, Burnett sarcastically quips that “trigger Mike strikes again.” Lowery’s explosiveness has once again had maximum damage with little pay off.

Conclusion

Bad Boys II is a police film that is rooted in the post- 9/11 United States. The movie premiered two years after the destruction of the Twin Towers and after former President George W. Bush, sent U.S. troops to invade Iraq.¹³⁰ Michael Bay’s film’s feature a prevailing sense of American exceptionalism at its most glorifying. *Bad Boys II* showcases a version of the U.S.

¹³⁰ Reuters Staff. “Timeline: Invasion, surge, withdrawal; U.S. forces in Iraq.” December 18. 2011. *Reuters.com* <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-usa-pullout-idUSTRE7BH08E20111218>

armed forces that is hyper-prepared and capable of solving domestic and foreign threats against the U.S. *Bad Boys II* establishes a clear relationship between local and federal law enforcement agencies, specialized units within police departments, and the U.S. armed forces, creating an interwoven network of U.S. national security during the War on Terror. This is demonstrated at the beginning of *Bad Boys II*, when a TNT officer briefs other law enforcement officers that drug traffickers have encountered problems with transporting their drugs over U.S. waters. This is due to American law enforcement patrols growing tighter since the September 11th terror attacks. This inter-agency assistance from the military was common among U.S. law enforcement agencies, but post- 9/11,¹³¹ law enforcement beefed up their technologies and reliance on shared intelligence.

Bay brandishes military convoys, helicopters, and boats with the same leering gaze that his camera casts upon women with shorts skirts and the sports cars featured throughout the film. *Bad Boys II* is a proud display of pro-law enforcement and pro-military interference across foreign waters in order to protect the ‘homeland.’ Throughout the film, Mike Lowery is antagonistic and xenophobic towards the non-white criminals and is pro-cop and anti-criminal towards the white criminals. His stance is interesting for a Black man to make in the early 2000s. Often, feelings of patriotism and American exceptionalism are difficult pills to swallow for Black Americans. Yet, Lowery freely exclaims that Haitian immigrants are in his “country!” In response to a white supremacist shouting “white power” Lowery just as passionately returns with “blue power!” His allegiance is not per se with his race, but his occupation.

¹³¹ Lois M. Davis, Michael Pollard, Kevin Ward, et. al. “The Evolution of Fusion Centers and Information-Sharing.” in *Long-Term Effects of Law Enforcement’s Post-9/11 Focus on Counterterrorism and Homeland Security*. Rand Corporation. 2010. 39-40.

Bad Boys II features an awkward handling of Lowery and Burnett's race. The film is not sure whether it wants to acknowledge and celebrate the Blackness of the lead characters, or if it wants to completely ignore their racial identities. In some moments their races are used as tools to gain anonymity in interactions with civilians and suspects, an aspect that harkens back to Blaxploitation films of the 1970s. In *Bad Boys II*, Bay and company, encode messages about patriotic Black police officers, which is not to suggest that Black men cannot be patriotic, but Black-Americans tend to have a more complex relationship with patriotism and jingoism than white Americans, due to the country's long history of mistreatment towards Black people and systematic racism. *Bad Boys II* fails to acknowledge that nuance.

The U.S. military and law enforcement agencies, along with their technology, are treated almost as a secondary character within the film. Bay is not the first director to have gratuitous displays of U.S. military technology flaunted so heavily in his films. Hollywood has a long-standing history with the Pentagon and gaining permission to feature military and federal government technology and equipment in American film productions.¹³² What makes Bay's films slightly different is that he extends a newfound emphasis to the U.S. armed forces and other domestic federal agencies through lingering camera gazes on the technology, spending extended periods of time following military operations that do not feature any of the stars of the film, and treating the U.S. military as municipal law enforcement's capable older sibling – willing to stand back and let them work independent, but ready to jump in at a moment's notice. *Bad Boys II* fails to problematize the police violence of its lead characters because these depictions are merely extensions of Bay's preferred style of filmmaking. The hyper-masculine

¹³² Tanner Mirrlees. "Transforming *Transformers* into Militainment: Interrogating the DoD-Hollywood Complex." *American Journal of Economics & Sociology*. Vol. 76, No. 2. (2017). doi:10.1111/ajes.12181. 409-414.

and hyper-aggressive action is what Bay is known for and it is what Hollywood movie studios want out of him.

Los Angeles Times, film critic Manhola Dargis, identified Will Smith's performance as Mike Lowery as "cool but never scary, a touch hip-hop and thoroughly audience-friendly."¹³³ It could be suggested that his performance, along with the entire film is covered in American exceptionalism and pro-cop sentiments with a touch of hip-hop. The racial politics of *Bad Boys II* are quite murky. It would be generous to suggest that *Bad Boys II* is unsure of how to handle a police film featuring two Black police officers in leading roles. In reality, the film has zero interest in exploring the nuances of two Black men as police officers in an urban and highly racially diverse American city. There is no discussion surrounding the workplace tension that arises for Black people in law enforcement or the tension that arise from Black men brutally policing and harassing other Black and Latinx people. The violence of the film also remains unexplored, simply functioning as pure hilarity and action-packed chaos for audiences to feast their eyes upon. The film is aware that some of the violence is ridiculous and that Lowery and Burnett's partnership is not entirely effective for police officers. Yet, *Bad Boys II* falls short of fully critiquing it in the name of humor and style, simply shrugging its shoulder as if to suggest, 'well what can you do? This *is* a buddy cop movie.'

¹³³ Ibid 104.

CHAPTER 4: *THE HEAT* INDUSTRIAL AND TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Bridesmaids Walked Down the Aisle So They Could Bring The Heat

The Heat stars Sandra Bullock as FBI Special Agent Sarah Ashburn and Melissa McCarthy as a Boston Police Detective Shannon Mullins. The film pits the two law enforcement officers against each other for a majority of the film, following the typical odd-couple buddy cop dynamic. Ashburn is the hyper-intelligent by the book FBI agent. Ashburn has isolated herself from her peers who find her difficult to work with because she is so arrogant about her competency as a federal agent. Mullins takes on the role of the impulsive ‘maverick’ police officer which is a common caricature in the buddy cop genre, she is all brute force and attitude compared to Ashburn. The two find themselves investigating a drug trafficking case in Boston. Ashburn is there because she wants to investigate a drug dealer named Larkin and if she successfully solves the case she will be up for a promotion at the New York FBI field office. Ashburn attempts to solve the case on her own, but learns that she needs assistance from someone who knows the city the best. This is Mullins. Over the course of the film, the two develop a familial relationship with each other and by the end consider each other “sisters.”

The Heat separates itself from other buddy-cop-action-comedies because it features two women as the leads. Unlike *Bad Boys II*, there is a significant lack of militaristic themes in the film even while the militarization of the U.S. law enforcement loomed heavily over the course of the 123-minute film. Mullins and Ashburn prefer to verbally antagonize their suspects as opposed to Lowery and Burnett, who choose to use all of the military technology at their disposal to gain the upper-hand over criminals. This reflects underlying stereotypical expectations about white women and Black men in Western society as a whole. Black men are often stereotypically expected to be loud and ostentatious and to revel in driving flashy cars.

Women, on the other hand, are often stereotyped as physically weaker and less assertive than men and thus more reliant on their ‘wit.’ *The Heat* also appears to be the first female led buddy-cop-action-comedy to receive mainstream acclaim and have the backing of a major Hollywood production studio.¹³⁴ *The Heat* was released two years after the success of *Bridesmaids* (2011), a critical and fan favorite blockbuster comedy starring an all-female cast that showcased women behaving crassly in the name of humor; a style of humor that was typically found in the “bromance” genre of comedies that was also highly popular in the 2000s and 2010s.¹³⁵ Many people who were attached to *Bridesmaids* were also a part of the production of *The Heat*. The success of *Bridesmaids*, led many studios to want to repeat the success of the film and hitch their wagons to the train of female-led comedies. It is important to highlight the relationship that *The Heat* shares with *Bridesmaids*, because unlike the *Bad Boys* franchise, or even *Lethal Weapon*, *The Heat* was not produced in the Hollywood blockbuster action film machine. *The Heat*’s comedic and stylistics roots are in a film like *Bridesmaids*, the film was not produced in a vacuum mostly concerned with creating more action films for the Hollywood summer box office. Yet, *The Heat* depicts the same kinds of police violence that have been a staple of the buddy-cop genre since the 1980s, such as verbal and physical harassment of suspects.

The Heat, features an undertone of neoliberal feminist individualism. Mullins and Ashburn, are forced to adapt, or in the case of Mullins whole-heartedly reject, the predominately male workspaces that they are in. Neoliberal feminist themes are present within the film because initially, Mullins and Ashburn both consider the best way to be a successful law enforcement

¹³⁴ Anne Bilson. “Rare Birds: The Female Buddy Cop Movie.” October 28. 2014.

Multiglom.com. <https://multiglom.com/2014/10/28/rare-birds-the-female-buddy-cop-movie/>

¹³⁵ Michael DeAngelis, Ron Becker, Hilary Radner, et al. *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Television and Film*. Wayne State University Press: 2014. 1-2.

officer is to do the work by themselves, without the assistance of anyone else. Mullins considers everyone a disappointment and therefore unworthy of working alongside her.

Neoliberalism, “is a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, normatively constructing and interpellating individuals as entrepreneurial actors.”¹³⁶

Even as partners, Ashburn and Mullins are initially dedicated to the idea of remaining individualistic in their policing styles, i.e. they still believe that a neoliberal feminist mentality is the best way to perform police work as women. As *The Heat* progresses, these neoliberal feminist values are reevaluated by the officers. The hyper-aggressive and vigilante style of policing, however, is rarely questioned by the characters or the film.

The Heat was directed by Paul Feig, an established Hollywood, writer, director, and producer. He first found success after creating the cult classic young adult television series *Freaks & Geeks* (1999-2000) and directed multiple television episodes for popular comedic television series from the 2000s such as *Arrested Development* (2003-), *30 Rock* (2006-2013) and *The Office* (2005-2013).¹³⁷ Feig also directed the comedic smash-hit *Bridesmaids*. *Bridesmaids* received critical and fan acclaim, garnering two Golden Globes award nominations for Best Motion Picture – Musical or Comedy and Best Actress in a Musical or Comedy for Kristen Wigg¹³⁸ and would later receive two Academy Award nominations, one for Best Original

¹³⁶ Catherine Rottenberg. *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*. Oxford University Press: 2018. 420.

¹³⁷ Krista Smith. “Paul Feig on the *Bridesmaids* Sequel, Female Comedy, and His S.N.L. Dreams.” January 5. 2012. *Vanityfair.com*.

<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2012/01/oscar-qa-paul-feig-bridesmaids-sequel-kristen-wiig-melissa-mccarthy>

¹³⁸ “*Bridesmaids*.” *GoldenGlobes.com*. <https://www.goldenglobes.com/film/bridesmaids>

Screenplay and a Best Supporting Actress for Melissa McCarthy, the films standout.¹³⁹

Financially, *Bridesmaids* was a huge success. It amassed \$169 million in domestic box office and \$288 million worldwide.¹⁴⁰ The overwhelmingly positive fan and critical response to *Bridesmaids* proved to Hollywood that films starring all-female casts behaving ‘un-ladylike’ can be guaranteed vehicles for financial success. There was a reluctance to greenlight films starring all-female comics that were also written by women. The success of *Bridesmaids*, was a step towards not only a numerical increase of roles for women in major Hollywood comedies, but it also signified an end to the male monopoly on a stereotypically masculine genre, and made way for 2013’s *The Heat*.

Up until the success of *Bridesmaids*, the 2000s and the 2010s had been defined by “bro” humor or the “man-child” stereotype that actor, writer, and producer Seth Rogen and director, producer, and writer Judd Apatow – who is a collaborator of Feig’s – preferred. These films were male-centric and featured a minimal number of female characters. According to Feig, most women in these comedies were depicted as “buzz kills”¹⁴¹, citing examples such as Sarah Silverman in *School of Rock* (2003) or Rachel Harris in *The Hangover* (2009).

Another obstacle *Bridesmaids* faced was the comparisons to *The Hangover*, directed by Todd Phillips, which amassed a massive box office return two years’ prior.¹⁴² *The Hangover* followed three men making sense of a bachelor party gone awry in Las Vegas. Before

¹³⁹ Rebecca Ford. “Bridesmaids Cast to Present at 2012 Oscars.” TheHollywoodReporter.com. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/bridesmaids-oscars-academy-awards-presenters-kristen-wiig-285145/>

¹⁴⁰ “Bridesmaids.” Boxofficemojo.com. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl2000848385/>.

¹⁴¹ Kurt Andersen. “The Bridesmaids Effect on The Heat.” June 28. 2013. *The World*. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2013-06-27/bridesmaids-effect-turns-heat>

¹⁴² “The Hangover.” Boxofficemojo.com. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/rl643204609/>

Bridesmaids was released some expected the film to be the female *Hangover*.¹⁴³ After its release *Bridesmaids* would be considered as more than that and the leader of a new era of films led by female comedians. Feig alongside the writer of *The Heat*, Katie Dippold spoke about the struggle to get other films greenlit by Hollywood executives before they were aware of the success that *Bridesmaids* would be.

Studio heads would exclaim “Oh well let’s see how *Bridesmaids* does,” almost suggesting that, “If *Bridesmaids* had not done well that people would have been like ‘welp that’s it, we tried, oh well.’”¹⁴⁴

This is a mentality that creatives encounter when pitching films to Hollywood studios that do not check the boxes of the traditional blockbuster film. If it is a film with a predominantly non-white cast, non-male cast or a cast with multiple LGBT+ characters, it is an immediate risk for big Hollywood studios. When a film features a cast or story that does not appear to be a bankable success to Hollywood the expectations are usually quite high for it to perform accordingly and it may become the standard that other films of its kind are compared to. The success of *Bridesmaids* clearly sparked a discussion across multiple platforms and garnered enough attention critically and financially because Feig and company were able to produce multiple other female-led comedies in the years after (*Spy* (2015) and *Ghostbusters* (2016)). Though many critics exclaimed that *Bridesmaids* was the first of its kind for female comedies, *Bridesmaids* along with *The Heat* have roots in the longstanding film genre that follows female friendships.

¹⁴³ Sophia Savage. “What Comparing *Bridesmaids* and *The Hangover* Reveals About Hollywood’s Gender Problem.” May 23. 2011. *Indiewire.com*.
<https://www.indiewire.com/2011/05/what-comparing-bridesmaids-and-the-hangover-reveals-about-hollywoods-gender-problem-237210/>

¹⁴⁴ Ibid 141.

Female Friendships that have *The Heat*

The female friendship film is a classic genre that began in the 1930s and 1940s, while the 1970s established the modern female friendship film. These films showcased a “dyadic sentimental female friendship” that at times featured various levels of political commentary about women’s rights.¹⁴⁵ The female friendship film is promoted to women and is

“a highly negotiated cinematic form that represents neither a progressive challenge to the patriarchal status quo nor a reactionary prop of dominant ideology; instead the individual films should be seen as complex instances of an intricate process of negotiation involving the intersection of competing ideological frameworks of both the films’ creators and their audiences.”¹⁴⁶

The female friendship film has a complex relationship with audiences and its creators. The films are not always intended to be inherently political. Some could be construed that way, but those from the 1980s and the 1990s were usually highly emotional displays of the female friendship. This is seen in films such as *Beaches* (1988), *Steel Magnolias* (1989), and *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991). Each of these films follow lifelong friendships between women void of their relationships with men. The female friendship film like other dominant cinema has had a dearth of stories following non-white women. There are a few notable exceptions such as *The Color Purple* (1985) and *Waiting to Exhale* (1995), but the genre is predominantly defined by middle-class white women. The genre is a complex array of political and social commentary on womanhood, but when other layers such as class, race, and criminality are interwoven the complexities of the genre expand.

¹⁴⁵ Karen Hollinger. “The Sentimental Female Friendship Film.” In *In The Company of Women*. University of Minnesota Press: 1998. 42.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid 145, 237.

Very few female friendship films crossover into the crime genre let alone the police film genre. The 1990s had multiple entries into the crossover genre of female friendships and crime dramas such as 1991's *Thelma & Louise*, which follows two white women who go on a road trip across the U.S. that leads to criminal activity that results in the death of the titular stars. *Set It Off* (1995), follows four Black women in South Central, Los Angeles who turn to robbing banks in order to afford college, lawyers, and other life expenses. The film eventually ends with the death of three of the four women. The criminal-female friendship genre has a few films within its canon, but there are not many female-buddy cop films. 2013's *The Heat* was the first to advertise itself as a buddy cop film with two women.¹⁴⁷ There may have been films that involved women as criminal investigators in teams such as the television and film adaptations of *Charlie's Angels*, but *The Heat* is different because the two women are clearly defined as law enforcement agents. Ashburn and Mullins have to work within the law and have to answer to their fellow law enforcement officers.

Throughout History Female Officers Have Brought *The Heat*

In law enforcement occupations women have been able to serve in the same positions as men for nearly half a century and today are about 11.9% of all police officers in the U.S.¹⁴⁸ Many American women took to law enforcement after World War II and were usually former military officers. Initially women usually performed social welfare positions such as investigating illegal abortion clinics, sexual assault cases, and domestic matters. Female officers also worked places where a women was more inclined to blend in better than her male

¹⁴⁷ Kyle Buchanan. "There are Even Fewer Female Buddy Comedies Than You Thought." June 28, 2013. *Vulture.com*. <https://www.vulture.com/2013/06/female-buddy-comedies-very-rare.html>

¹⁴⁸ Carol A. Archbold and Dorothy Moses Schulz. "Research on Women in Policing: A Look at the Past, Present and Future." *Sociology Compass*. Vol. 6, No. 9. (2012). <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2012.00501.x>. 694.

counterparts, such as posing as a sex worker or the wife of a male detective.¹⁴⁹ Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s women acquired more professional and legal rights within the workplace. Black women along with other racial and ethnic minority women faced a combination of difficulties in law enforcement due to them being double minorities.¹⁵⁰ Women were able to serve in higher positions in police departments through the expansion of workplace equality laws. Female law enforcement officers, similar to Black police officers, grew in frequency in television and film productions as their roles increased in law enforcement agencies in real life.

Women have a somewhat similar history in television and film as Black law enforcement officers. Female law enforcement officers or criminal investigators began appearing more frequently in television roles in the 1970s, just like Black law enforcement officers, due to the civil rights gains for both marginalized groups. Black police officers and criminal investigators experienced a significant growth in film and television, notably in the creation of the Blaxploitation film genre, whereas female officers experienced an increase in television police or criminal investigation procedurals, like *Cagney & Lacey* (1981-1988). Roles only increased, though not significantly as the decade progressed for women in police and criminal investigation television series. In the 2000s, Kimberly A. Detardo-Bora studied ten primetime television crime dramas. Sixty-nine female characters were examined and the study revealed that young white women were overrepresented as crime scene investigators, detectives, and special agents.¹⁵¹ The

¹⁴⁹ Ibid 148, 696.

¹⁵⁰ Mary Dodge and Mark Pogrebin. "African-American Policewoman; An Exploration of Professional Relationships." *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management*. Vol. 20, No. 1. (1997). <https://heinonline-org.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/polic24&i=552>. 550-552.

¹⁵¹ Kimberly A. Detardo-Bora. "Criminal Justice "Hollywood Style": How Women in Criminal Justice Professions Are Depicted in Prime-Time Television Dramas." *Women & Criminal Justice*. Vol. 19, No. 1. (2009). 166. <https://heinonline-org.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/wwcj19&i=153>.

women in these programs were depicted as “intelligent, competitive, self-confident, and assertive.”¹⁵² But the most important conclusion of the study was that the programs maintained stereotypical depictions of women such as being “dependent, subordinate to authority, and less verbally aggressive.”¹⁵³ Though there have been significant civil rights gains for women since the 1970s and women have been holding leadership roles in law enforcement agencies in real life for over fifty years, representation of law enforcement officers on television is still lacking.

In film women fare about the same as their television counterparts. In a Wilson and Blackburn study of depictions of female municipal officers in police films of the 112 films examined that spanned from 1971 to 2011 it was revealed that women only starred or had co-leading roles in 15 of the 112 films reviewed.¹⁵⁴ Based off of this finding a few conclusions were made, such as, there was a reliance on older and senior male police officers as authority figures. Secondly, 8 of out the 12 films that were from the 1990s featured the women dealing with mental health issues, suggesting that if a woman has a career in law enforcement she is doing it because she has something ‘wrong’ with her. Lastly, the real world barriers that women tend to experience in the workplace, for example: gender discrimination, harassment, and isolation from male colleagues are all but non-existent in the films,¹⁵⁵ thus presenting a somewhat misleading version of law enforcement work for audiences. Not only are there behavioral standards that women adhere to in dominant cinema and television as female law enforcement officers,

¹⁵² Ibid 151.

¹⁵³ Ibid 151.

¹⁵⁴ Franklin T. Wilson and Ashley G. Blackburn. “The Depiction of Female Municipal Police Officers in the First Four Decades of the Core Cop Film Genre: “It’s a Man’s World.”” *Women & Criminal Justice*. Vol. 24, No. 1. (2014). 95. <https://heinonline-org.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/wwcj24&i=83>.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid 154, 98.

according to multiple studies, but there are also physical expectations that actresses conform to in the male-dominated genre of police and action films.

Action Heroines and *The Heat They Bring On-Screen*

The white male body of the 1980s action hero was considered to be a

“site upon which masculine crisis— personal and often national— could be expressed and resolved through action, beatings, and eventual defeat of the enemy, whether international terrorists, African Americans, or women.”¹⁵⁶

The muscled up bodies of action heroes was the norm for the 1980s. The rise in brute physicality was viewed by Susan Jeffords¹⁵⁷ as a physical embodiment of the conservatism of former President Ronald Regan’s politics that was an answer to the immediate previous president, Jimmy Carter’s softer politics of the 1970s. This physicality was about “remasculinizing America.”¹⁵⁸ Jeffery A. Brown states that women were not immune from this reliance on the hard-muscled brute action body. The very few female action heroines, were usually the female version of the stoic masculine action hero, dressing in muscle t-shirts and tank tops that revealed their oiled-up biceps, with the stoic glare and guns to boot.¹⁵⁹

This is seen in Sigourney Weaver’s portrayal of “Final Girl” Ripley in *Alien* (1979), though she would eventually grow out of this role and take on a more commanding role in the film’s sequel in *Aliens* (1981). “Ripley takes charge of a group of Marines and then, on her own, fights off dozens of alien monsters using guns, bombs, flamethrowers and a mechanical

¹⁵⁶ Philippa Gates. “Investigating Crisis: The Specatacle of “Masculinity.” In *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film*. State University Press of New York. 2006. 135.

¹⁵⁷ Susan Jeffords. *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Regan Era*. Rutgers University Press. 1994.

¹⁵⁸ Jeffery A. Brown, editor James Kendrick. “Unlikely Action Heroine.” In *A Companion to the Action Film*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 2019. DOI:10.1002/9781119100744. 400.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid 158, 401.

exoskeleton unit.”¹⁶⁰ Brown suggests a similar transformation took place for Sarah Connor in the sequel to another science-fiction action horror film *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991). In the sequel Connor has gained a significant amount of muscle and brandishes automatic rifles as if they are an extension of her body, like the T-100 robot that is hunting her family, which is a stark contrast to the character in the first film, who was a helpless young woman. Connor and Ripley also tackle motherhood in the sequels to their respective films. Each handle their maternal roles quite differently. Ripley quickly takes to a younger girl and adopts her as her own on the ship and it is her driving force in fighting against the alien that has found itself on the ship. In contrast Connor is driven to protect her son because he has been deemed as the savior of humanity this pressure causes Connor to be a distant mother. Connor and Ripley are motivated by fierce desires to protect their respective children from violent creatures. Ripley and Connor conquer these creatures through their intellect and instinctive force, not quite so different from their male action counterparts.

Later into the 1990s and the 2000s the male action hero was more refined and less reliant on sheer physical force and more so on his intellect. Though there was still room for the muscled up hero, it was no longer the only type of action hero in Hollywood.¹⁶¹ Just as there was a transformation of the male action hero body, there was also a transformation of the action heroine’s body. Since the 1990s there are more action heroines and they somewhat vary in age and race but their body type is usually thin and less muscled. Which has been dubbed by scholars as the “Waif-Fu” trope. A “Waif-Fu” action heroine is young, pretty, thin, and white.¹⁶² This is a body type that Melissa McCarthy is notably outside of, though, her co-star Sandra Bullock does

¹⁶⁰ Ibid 158, 401.

¹⁶¹ Ibid 156, 147.

¹⁶² Ibid 158, 405-406.

fall into it in *The Heat*. Filmmakers have expressed a preference for a swift and graceful fighting style for their action heroines that Lisa Funnell argues that Hollywood appropriated from Hong Kong action films.¹⁶³ Filmmakers in the 2000s and 2010s preferred to show their action heroine's brutality via their body and fighting style versus bantering with their enemies. This is seen in Uma Thurman's performance as Beatrix Kiddo in *Kill Bill Vol. I and II*. (2003, 2004), or Angelina Jolie's performances in *Wanted* (2008) and *Salt* (2010). The new millennium action heroine is still just as stoic as the heroines from the 1980s, but has mastered a sleeker style of fighting that is less explosive and more efficient. Melissa McCarthy's portrayal of Mullins in *The Heat* is the complete opposite of this preferred action heroine. Sandra Bullock only somewhat meets the physical stereotype of the contemporary action heroine, but the similarities between Bullock and the Waif-Fu trope stop there.

Mullins is a fat, forty-something Boston Police Detective, who prefers to throw her weight around physically and literally when commandeering suspects and dealing with those she views as unhelpful to her ultimate goals. Ashburn, is a thin, tight-lipped and highly competent and confident FBI agent. The pair come together in extraneous circumstances to defeat a drug kingpin wreaking havoc across the city of Boston. Mullins always has a quick comeback for an assailant and is comfortable letting it be known that she does not think highly of her colleagues and her superiors. While Ashburn is a tactical and 'by the book' agent who respects her superiors, she also feels as if her colleagues are not up to snuff with her investigative skills. These women prefer to work alone because they are incapable of working with partners in their respective departments. Mullins is harsh and mean where a 2010s action heroine would be demur

¹⁶³ Lisa Funnell. "Assimilating Hong Kong Style for the Hollywood Action Woman." ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2010. NR64398.

and sleek. Ashburn is awkward and anti-social where a 2010s action heroine is flirtatious and a social chameleon. The film goes to great lengths to showcase how these women are not typical action heroines and they are also not typical depictions of female law enforcement agents as well. Though, their depictions are a bit off the beaten path of a typical Hollywood buddy- cop-action-comedy, *The Heat* is sure to depict police work in a fashion that follows many of its predecessors. The following scene analysis will reveal how Mullins and Ashburn's physicality as comedic actresses and action heroines is atypical of contemporary action heroines and female comedic performances, but their behaviors reinforces ideology about law enforcement officers and policing in the name of humor.

‘We’re *The Heat*’: Character Introductions

The Heat opens with Ashburn running an FBI drug bust. She is seen just outside waiting to storm the building with fellow agents standing behind her against a wall. Ashburn is counting down attempting to guide the agents into the building on her cue, which the agents completely ignore and storm in without her. Ashburn is highly skilled, finding drugs in the walls of the home they raided that even the drug sniffing dog could not find, and is gloating about solving a serial killer case dubbed the Red Falls Killer. Her colleagues are both irritated with her arrogant attitude and intimidated by her competency as a federal agent. As Ashburn walks away a male colleague looks after her musing sarcastically, “wonder why she’s single?” This isolation is later noted by Ashburn’s supervisor Hale, who is a Latino man that Ashburn repeatedly addresses as “Señor” and calls him by his name using an exaggerated Spanish accent. Ashburn is attempting to be politically correct and respectful but, to both him and the audience, it comes across as ridiculous. As she is discussing her work as an agent, her accolades are listed. Hale notes that he is being promoted and knows that Ashburn wants his current position, but Ashburn probably will

not get the promotion because she is difficult to work with. There have been numerous complaints from other agents citing Ashburn always displays “arrogance, competitiveness, and showmanship.” Ashburn would hope that her success as a federal agent should be the determining factor for whether or not she gets a promotion and not her interpersonal skills, but alas, that is not the case. If Ashburn successfully solves a drug case in Boston, she will be seriously considered for the promotion.

Mullins’ opening scene is more akin to a traditional buddy-cop comedy in that it features the action-packed violence that appeared in the opening scenes of *Bad Boys II*. Both openings are attempts to establish these characters as capable enforcers of the law who will apprehend their targets by any means necessary. Mullins is apprehending a john who was attempting to pay for sex. They engage in a back and forth exchange that has Mullins sarcastically quipping that she really hoped that the john did not have “a wife and a bunch of kids” after she asks for his wallet to look at his ID and notices that he has a picture of his family in the wallet. Mullins also asks for his cell phone which he hands over. She calls the john’s wife revealing that he was attempting to pay for sex. The john tries to take the phone from Mullins but she quickly stops it by grabbing his hand and repeatedly saying “don’t do that.” The john reveals that he is cheating on his wife because she recently had a baby and he does not feel comfortable having sex with her. Mullins is immediately disgusted with his statement and tells him to unbuckle his seatbelt. She then yanks the john out of the car through the driver’s seat window. Mullins arrests the john and puts him in the back of her personal car, a beat up Rambler. This scene is enough to establish Mullins as a strict detective who is able to quickly apprehend a suspect and aggressively take them down, but Mullins’ is in her fullest form as the ‘maverick’ police officer minutes later.

As Mullins is driving the john to the police station she comes across a young Black man, who will later be revealed to be a low level drug dealer named Rojas, and a few other gang members. Rojas is smoking and Mullins calls him out stating he is her “favorite asshole” and he must be upset that she took business from him, since she arrested the john. Rojas is confused, not understanding why she keeps bothering him, which suggests that she has interacted with him before. Rojas further goes on to say that Mullins is “trying to break down a successful Black man,” and asks if she is a “racist?” Mullins’ anger intensifies with this accusation and shouts back “Don’t play that racist bullshit card with me! Nine out of ten guys I fuck are Black guys!” Rojas rolls his eyes and mutters that she needs to go away and get her “groove back.” Suddenly, Mullins notices that the young man is smoking, presumably an illegal substance. Realizing he has been caught Rojas breaks off in a sprint and Mullins chuckles as she realizes that a chase is on.

Mullins takes the car through back alleys with the john still arrested in the back seat screaming that Mullins is “crazy!” The chase culminates on foot where Rojas is running on the street and Mullins throws a watermelon from a nearby fruit stand at him. Rojas falls to the ground, but not without yelling that Mullins is a racist one more time while she arrests him. Rojas ends up face down on the road with Mullins kneeling next to him as she arrests him. This scene is a succinct encapsulation of Mullins’ character in *The Heat*. Mullins certainly looks the part of the tough, no-nonsense plain-clothed detective to the point that the john earlier in her opening scene assumed that she was a drug dealer due to her rumpled hair and frumpy clothes. Mullins later enters the police precinct and sarcastically quips to all of her male colleagues who shirk away in fear as she approaches. Quickly it is established for audiences that Ashburn and

Mullins appear to be complete opposites in policing styles and personalities, yet they both lack interpersonal skills that have led to them be isolated from their predominantly male colleagues.

The Heat does a fair job of establishing the isolation that the two law enforcement officers experience in their predominantly male occupations. Ashburn appears to be removed mainly from her male colleagues, but the film does not show her interactions with other female FBI agents during her scenes in the office. Ashburn further laments later on to Mullins, after being harshly reprimanded by her supervisor, that “Being a woman in this field is hard,” and that “men are intimidated by her” Ashburn also states that it is “hard to make female friends.” Unlike most police films, *The Heat* both problematizes and fits the established genre dynamics of female police films noted by Wilson and Blackburn. Wilson and Blackburn concluded, women in police fiction rarely acknowledge the gender discrimination that they face in their jobs, certainly not as head on as Ashburn is in this moment.

The Heat fits into the female police officer character tropes, for example that all female law enforcement officers must have a troubling past in order to justify why they want to be officers of the law, because it is also later revealed that Ashburn was a foster child. Mullins argues that growing up as a foster child probably affects her as an adult, but Ashburn is quick to brush it off. She eventually gives in and states that it “definitely” affects her adulthood. Wilson and Blackburn found that police media centered around women often implies that the women have mental health issues, suggesting that to be a law enforcement agent as a woman something must be ‘wrong’ with them. Mullins is consistently described as mentally unstable and crazy throughout the film and Ashburn is working through childhood trauma, implying that they both are mentally unwell in some way and that that could be a reason why they chose their career paths. It certainly reflects in how the two women operate as law enforcement officers, which is

something that can occur in real life for officers. Policing can be a very intense job that often requires officers to participate in emotionally taxing work, at times causing them to potentially bring personal traumas and biases into their workspace and their interactions with civilians.¹⁶⁴

‘We’re *The Heat*’: Police Work

The following two scenes not only further establish the diverging policing styles of Ashburn and Mullins but also display how the pair terrify their perpetrators into submission. Mullins is both verbally and physically intimidating to her assailants while Ashburn uses her intellect to outsmart the criminals. The first instance of Ashburn and Mullins working together, albeit, quite reluctantly at this point, showcases how Ashburn and Mullins can work harmoniously under tense circumstances. Ashburn and Mullins end up at the home of a female Bulgarian drug dealer, Tatiana, in hopes that she will bring them closer to Larkin. Ashburn and Mullins stand outside of Tatiana’s apartment discussing how they want to interact with her. Mullins ever-ready to get to the point, suggests that they “interrogate” her and bring “the heat” to “scare the shit out of her.” Ashburn immediately rebuffs that statement stating they no longer use the word “interrogate” because it is a strong word, and insists that they “interview” her instead. Mullins reluctantly agrees to Ashburn’s approach and strong arms her way into Tatiana’s apartment after the suspect initially attempts to close the door on the officers. Ashburn begins “interviewing” Tatiana, and her politeness is visibly upsetting Mullins because Ashburn’s way is clearly not working. Tatiana is sarcastic and evasive to the questions Ashburn is asking.

¹⁶⁴ Kerry M. Karaffa and Julie M. Koch. “Stigma, Pluralistic Ignorance, and Attitudes Toward Seeking Mental Health Services among Police Officers.” *Criminal Justice and Behavior*. Vol. 43, No. 6. (2016). <https://heinonline-org.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/crmjusbhv43&i=729>. 759-760.

Eventually, Mullins becomes frustrated and sits down next to Tatiana and attempts to relate to her by talking about how she would love to go on a drug binge for a week and just wants some answers from her. Ashburn is confused by Mullins rant and actually questions aloud “is this Training Day?” – a reference to the 2001 police buddy-cop thriller that featured a cop who was participating in criminal activity. Tatiana becomes irritated by both women and demands they get out of her home. Mullins and Ashburn stand up, but just as they are getting ready to go, Mullins kicks in the bathroom door revealing Tatiana’s mother sitting on the toilet. Chaos ensues and Ashburn and Mullins are rushed out of Tatiana’s apartment. As they leave the apartment, Mullins asks if Ashburn was able to grab a cigarette butt that Tatiana placed in an ashtray earlier in the scene. Ashburn is startled but admits that she was and they are able to get her DNA into the system. Mullins’ policing style maybe brash and over the top, but she is also quite smart and is able to read a situation in order to achieve her ends.

The next scene is another interrogation scene that showcases Mullins and Ashburn’s polarized policing styles. Interrogation scenes work so well in buddy-cop films because they showcase the opposing policing styles of the lead characters which are merely extensions of their personalities. The interrogation scenes also function as a clear example for audiences to witness aggressive and temperamental behavior exhibited by officers that could possibly mirror police harassment in real life. Interrogation scenes bring a third person into the dynamic between the two partners in a buddy-cop film, providing a target for both of their frustrations. The scene can also showcase the personalities of each character as they handle their police work.

In the case of *The Heat*, an interrogation once again displays Mullins and Ashburn’s differing opinions on what it means to interview someone versus interrogating them, during an interrogation of Julian a known Larkin henchman. Mullins wants to enter the interrogation room

and start shouting at the suspect, but Ashburn begs her not to stating that she has to build a “bond” with the suspect before she can ask any questions. Mullins reluctantly acquiesces, but says that she will only wait so long. Nearly a second after Ashburn enters the interrogation room Mullins bursts in. Ashburn urges her not to do anything crazy, to which Mullins responds sarcastically that she’s not going to do anything “crazy” because she is a police officer. The line is both a call out to Mullins behavior throughout the film, which had been described as excessively crazy and mentally unstable, but it can also be related to real life. Police officers sometimes react in ways that civilians may not have assumed that they would, sometimes with dangerous consequences for all involved.

Mullins sits on the desk while the suspect is handcuffed and demands that Ashburn turns around in a corner. Mullins plays Russian Roulette with the suspect and points the gun at his crotch. Initially the suspect thinks Mullins is bluffing, but as she clicks the trigger again and again, it is revealed that she is not. The tension and the humor reach a breaking point as Ashburn frantically urges the suspect to tell Mullins anything so Mullins will stop. Mullins remains cool and demands that Ashburn keeps her head turned so that she can “pass a polygraph.” Eventually, Hale, Ashburn’s supervisor, enters the room and the suspect is allowed to leave since he was not formally charged with a crime. Hale criticizes Ashburn’s work, which is something that Ashburn is visibly uncomfortable with seeing as she is used to being viewed as competent at her job. Hale walks away and Mullins returns to Ashburn stating that “if you’re not getting in trouble; you’re not doing your job.” Mullins believes that the only way to get work done is through reckless and violent means. To further establish this persona, Mullins is shown keeping a cache of weapons in her rundown apartment, which she enjoys admiring as if they were collectible toys. Unlike the

high-tech military technologies that are treated as secondary characters in *Bad Boys II*, Mullins' weapons are merely an extension of her personality.

The film has established a clear dynamic at this point: Ashburn and Mullins tensely go back and forth about whose style of policing they will perform first. This is similar to the relationship dynamic that permeates *Bad Boys II*. Lowery and Burnett often engage in shouting matches about Burnett's unwillingness to join in a firefight. Lowery eventually gets through to Burnett and he joins in. In *The Heat*, Mullins acquiesces until it is established that Ashburn's style is inefficient for the timeline that they are working on. Then, they do it Mullins' way, which is brute force and tense verbal exchanges that border on harassment. Mullins style of policing is not unique to this particular performance of Melissa McCarthy. Often in her films, her characters are able to tear down her male co-stars via verbal assaults.

"McCarthy's particularly relentless dick jokes are not just humorous attacks on men but a deconstruction of the assumed naturalized powerful male body at its very foundation.

By calling into question their possessions of the phallus, by accusing them of lacking it, McCarthy is challenging their very status as icons of masculinity."¹⁶⁵

After Ashburn's more tactical and strategic style of policing fails throughout the film, Mullins threatens harm to their male suspects' bodies in particular, their penises. This comes to a head at the end of the film when Ashburn actually shoots Larkin in his groin area. The women have rarely actually engaged in a firefight throughout the film only ever brandishing their weapons or threatening to use them, up until this point. When they finally do shoot someone, it is Ashburn and it is in a particularly graphic place.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid 158, 412.

Later Ashburn decides to even forgo attempting her strategic style of policing and goes straight to Mullins style. After Ashburn and Mullins were sidelined on the Larkin investigation, Ashburn and Mullins find each other again after a brief stint apart and find themselves speaking to Rojas again. Rojas is a low level drug dealer who has minimal information, but the women always find themselves mining him for information. Something that the film acknowledges is probably not the smartest idea to do to low level drug dealers, because Mullins younger brother is a recently released ex-convict who was arrested for drug dealing. Ashburn wants to use him for their investigation with Larkin, but Mullins adamantly refuses to get him involved because he is trying to go “straight.” Getting Mullins brother involved in the investigation is off the table, but mining Rojas for information is perfectly fine. Ashburn and Mullins kick his door open and Mullins asks if Ashburn wants to interview him. Ashburn smirks and says she has “something better” which leads them to hang Rojas by his feet from a fire escape outside of his apartment. The women jokingly threaten to drop him outside of the window with Mullins exclaiming that he is slipping. Eventually, the jokes turn serious and he slips out of both of their hands and lands on top of his car. Rojas is in shock and realizes that he landed on his car and groans. The moment is intended to be humorous and it is, but the humor is undercut by the joke showcasing another display of police harassment from the women. Ashburn initially rejected this style of policing, but she has come to the conclusion that it is the most effective way to solve cases on a short timeline.

The Acceptance and Rejection of Neoliberal Feminism in *The Heat*

The Heat is quick to establish how their leading female characters are no different than their male counterparts. Unlike *Bad Boys II*, which has little to no self-awareness towards the race of their lead actors, *The Heat* is aware. It quite often tackles head-on the role its characters’

gender plays in their occupations. *Bad Boys II*, on the other hand, does not explore the race or masculinity of its leads. If anything Mullins and Ashburn are better at their jobs than their male colleagues. This is established through Ashburn and Mullins self-isolating actions and their competency as law enforcement officers that effectively put targets on their backs as women in their male dominated workspaces. The action of the officers showcases a thin undertone of neoliberal feminist values. Neoliberal feminism displaces issues that women face in their everyday lives as a result of patriarchal structures, and turns them into individual obstacles to overcome. In *The Heat*, this perspective is most evident in Mullins' and Ashburn's recognition that they are on their own. The only way for Mullins' to protect her city and her family from Larkin is to solve the case herself. For Ashburn, it is already proven that she is an effective FBI agent but for her to receive the promotion she rightfully deserves, Ashburn has to solve the Larkin case herself, thus, putting the fate of their lives in their own hands. At the beginning of *The Heat*, both, Ashburn and Mullins accept neoliberal feminism because they believe the only way to solve the case, is to do it individually and, both assume their way is the best way. But by the end of the film the two women learn that they have to solve the case together. Though someone could surmise that their newfound sense of sisterhood only extends to each other, that bond does dilute the individualism inherent to neoliberalism.

Neoliberal feminism thus, is only partly endorsed within *The Heat*, however, because at no point is a particular stance made one way or another towards a specific feminist model. Through the actions of Ashburn and Mullins, and by the nature of their occupations as female law enforcement officers in a male dominated field, there is a vaguely feminist ethos in the basic plotline: two women joining together after experiencing isolation – or in Mullins case intentional

isolation – from male colleagues and choosing to have each other’s backs and to work together for a greater good.

In this way, *The Heat* showcases that neoliberal models of feminism are problematic in practice, especially in a field such as law enforcement where there is a practical need for dependency on another officer for safety reasons. In addition, *The Heat* depicts the isolation and compromises that Ashburn and Mullins have had to make in their personal lives in order to have relatively successful careers as women in law enforcement. For instance, Ashburn acknowledges that it is especially difficult to be a *female* law enforcement agent and that she has had to make concessions in her personal life in order to have a successful career, showcasing that women cannot ‘have it all.’ The sacrifice that Ashburn makes in her romantic relationships is made up for her in a female friendship with Mullins by the end of the film, gaining a “sister.” While Mullins’ is not lacking in male desire and affection, she, just like Ashburn, struggles to make female friends. *The Heat* alludes to structural forces at play that have made Ashburn and Mullins’ careers more difficult because they are not men, and that they have attempted to overcome these problems themselves but have been unable to due to both personal and systematic forces.

The Heat calls into question the feminist ethos of neoliberal feminism’s individualistic values, by painting Ashburn and Mullins as individuals who prefer to work alone and appear to be unable to work in partnership with anyone. This ethos is called into question when over the course of events within *The Heat*, it is determined by the pair that the most effective way for the two to solve the investigation is together. Just as it is revealed through *The Heat* that neoliberal feminism is not effective in law enforcement, it also reveals that violence and hyper-aggressive policing is effective. This is highlighted as Ashburn slowly abandons her logical and level-

headed form of policing for Mullins' vigilant, verbal, and physically aggressive policing preference.

Ashburn's logical and strategic style of policing is thrown out the window for Mullins' violent and vigilante style of policing. It is the most effective in the film and rarely do the women face consequences for their violent actions. Ashburn gets reprimanded by her superior only once for engaging in behavior like Mullins. Mullins barely receives any reprimanding from her captain, and when he begins to say something to her it turns into Mullins rampaging against him and belittling his manhood. Mullins does get ridiculed by DEA agents who are also investigating Larkin, but their ridicule is about her appearance more than her actual work style, which Ashburn calls them out on stating that Mullins is a better law enforcement officer than anyone she knows, including herself. In fact, Mullins receives a commendation for her work on the Larkin case at the end of the film. Her violent and aggressive behavior is eventually rewarded by her peers.

Under the guise of proto-feminist values Mullins and Ashburn take advantage of their positions of power to get answers out of perpetrators. Mullins yanks people out of their driver seats, kicks in multiple people's apartment doors, shoves people out of the way, and verbally barrages anyone who does not automatically comply with her. These moments are intended to be humorous, showcasing that women can be just as intimidating as men, but there are problematic depictions encoded within *The Heat*, which imply that law enforcement officers can do whatever they want with little consequences or reactions from their supervisors, especially if the subordinates push back against them in the slightest. Throughout the film Mullins and Ashburn verbally and physically intimidate their suspects. Initially they are usually met with questionable looks, but as soon as the situation sets in the suspects move into action.

The Heat is light on action scenes that are staples in Hollywood action films, but there is a reliance on verbal assaults and witty dialogue that is intended for maximum offense against the male characters. In the case of attempting to subvert the patriarchal structures that exist within law enforcement and the masculine genre conventions of the buddy-cop-action-comedy, *The Heat*, depicts two female law enforcement officers achieving their goals through, brute force and verbal harassment. Encoded in the film are feminist messages that arose from the particular popular cultural moment that the film was released in, where Hollywood studios took advantage of audiences' desire to see women in more leading roles. Although, the film takes an ambivalent stance toward neoliberal feminist values, it humorizes problematic depictions of police violence. Thus even when the aggressive masculinity of the buddy-cop action-comedy is subverted, police violence still remains a key staple of the genre. *The Heat* did not promote itself to be a bastion of perfect police or feminist behavior, but in its effort to show that women can be just as funny as men and are just as good as men at their jobs, the film ends up promoting harmful images about police violence and behavior that Americans often see in real life.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Bringing *Bad Boys II* and *The Heat* to Conclusion

Philippa Gates stated that:

“Film is a powerful medium through which social values can be exported and emulated through cultural imperialism; however, it also offers a specific processing of American culture as a mainstream and popular entertainment.”¹⁶⁶

This is no more apparent than in films that feature American law enforcement officers. Since nearly the beginning of American policing there have been questions of how police use their force and their positions of power over the communities that they are intended to protect. In the second chapter, I highlighted the role of the judicial system and federal, local, and state governments in the militarization of urban police forces between the 1960s and the early 2000s. Through the reallocation of funds, the shuttering of social welfare programs, and the encouragement of aggression in the field, urban communities became subjected to harsher, and at time, dangerous, policing practices. While these changes were playing out in American cities, profitable and popular genres of police fiction, such as buddy-cop films, made violent, aggressive actions central to the stories they told.

With the advent of social media, police violence can now be viewed via viral social media posts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, or through the actual body camera footage the police officers wear. People can witness up close and personal the very moment when encounters with police turn violent. These videos proliferate across social media and continue to spark discussion surrounding difficulties of police brutality, and have spurred efforts to defund police,

¹⁶⁶ Philippa Gates. “Introduction.” In *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film*. State University of New York Press. 2006. 6.

or completely abolish the force. Along with demands for police reform at the federal, state, and local levels, there has also been an increased interest in fictional depictions of police officers.

Through an industrial analysis which explored the production process and the climate of Hollywood studios at the time of production and release for *The Heat* and *Bad Boys II* I was able to establish the context the respective films were released in. Both of these films were produced in their own particular popular cultural and industrial moment, with two very different casts and different creative teams backing the production of the films. But what both films have in common is the police violence that is a consistent source of humor.

What this suggests is that even when important aspects of the buddy-cop genre are shifted – for instance, the race and gender of the lead characters – police violence is still a crucial part of these films. It seems to be inherently ingrained in the genre, no matter what aspects are changed. As seen in the analysis of *Bad Boy II* and *The Heat*, when a film, at least on the surface, steps out of the traditional casting conventions of the buddy-cop genre (two Black cops or two white female law enforcement agents) the stories remain the same. Police violence is almost always the main source of humor, legitimizing hyper-aggressive acts towards civilians. Applying the encoding/decoding model it is clear that messages about real-life police violence are encoded into *Bad Boys II* and *The Heat*. These messages are encoded through choices made about storytelling, production design, casting, and, most important of all, humor. The binding of humor and violence within *Bad Boys II* and *The Heat* suggests that violence is a normal and non-problematic occurrence in everyday policing. In the vein of cultivation analysis, it is clear that both films present excessive violence and mistreatment of suspects as a necessity to policing. Although other approaches toward police work are presented in these films, violence is usually depicted as the most efficient. These films cultivate a version of reality, where not only is this

violence humorous, but it is eventually rewarded. This matters greatly because it can inform audience attitudes about policing in real life. In particular, buddy-cop films tell stories that reinforce ideas, such as that violence is the only way to achieve ‘compliance’ or that communities of color require harsher policing than predominantly white communities.

Solutions

Now that the problem has been identified what are some possible solutions to this problematic reliance on violence as a source of humor? These suggestions are not all-encompassing and there are significant factors at hand that contribute to the production and completion of a major Hollywood motion picture. For the sake of this conclusion, I will attempt to briefly summarize a few possibilities. The first solution would be to completely eliminate displays of police violence, extreme uses of force, and hyper-aggression from the genre completely and find new sources of humor for these films. This would be a difficult task to achieve because violence, however, is ingrained into the genre, it goes hand in hand with the humor. Without it where does the humor come from?

The second solution would be to at least show the psychological, interpersonal, and professional tolls that hyper-aggressive policing has on the lead characters of the film. For instance, partners could be shown negotiating the style of policing that they want to perform over the course of the film. Films could avoid plot points that appear to reward the hyper-aggressive behavior of an officer, and instead show them reprimanded by their peers and superior. Scripts could show partners in conflict with each other’s policing style. *The Heat* almost had this dynamic going for it, Mullins’ policing was inappropriate according to Ashburn, and Ashburn made sure to tell Mullins’ what she thought. But alas, Ashburn is the one to acquiesce in the end, adopting Mullins’ policing style. Humor arose from the interactions that the two women shared

having those negotiations, so it is possible to remain humorous and have honest discussions about police behavior in a comedy. *Bad Boys II* has a similar dynamic as well, Burnett attempts to negotiate with Lowery throughout the film, but Lowery's policing style is an unconquerable force that drives the story along within the film. Without Lowery's shoot-first-ask-questions-second style, there would be little to no places to scour humor out of within *Bad Boys II*.

Audiences, just like the characters, may have moments of negotiation as well when viewing these films. Some viewers may see these actions for what they are on-screen: humorous and silly acts of police officers in a film. Others could interpret them against the grain and recognize the harmful and destructive encounters that they represent in the real world. Hall notes that texts are polysemic and that an audience can completely remix or misinterpret what producers intended to encode in their texts. Ideally, audiences will take a critical eye to these films and demand that police fiction either treat this topic responsibly or not at all.

Broader Implications

My study of *Bad Boys II* and *The Heat* has identified and analyzed storytelling, casting, and industrial issues within the buddy-cop-action-comedy genre. As stated in the first chapter of this project, my interest was with the texts and the dominant ideologies encoded into the texts, not with audience reception. If I were to continue this study or encourage other scholars to explore this topic, I would suggest they monitor how audiences interpret these texts in the era of #BLM versus audiences in the past that may not have been as familiar with the social issue of police brutality. This research would be rooted in audience reception studies as opposed to the qualitative and critical media study that I performed.

Another angle to approach this topic would be to attempt to answer the same questions with other police genres, such as the 'dirty cop' film, the political thriller in which a law

enforcement officer must stop a terrorist attack, or police thrillers with a female protagonist. Do these films problematize or legitimize police violence within their respective films? Is it explained away as a necessity for the job or is the officer reprimanded? Dirty cop films tend to place responsibility on the institutional dynamics that surround law enforcement. At some point in these films it is revealed that the ‘dirty cop’ felt as if they had no choice but to be aggressive and ‘skim off of the top’ because of the poor pay and benefits that comes with being a law enforcement officer, coupled with the mental and emotional toll the job has had on their lives. In “war on terror” thrillers, is violence treated with contempt by other officers or is it viewed as a necessary evil for the protection of national security? Is violence performed by women officers in police thrillers’ treated as a necessity and almost encouraged because these women are in positions where they have to defend themselves against physically intimidating male antagonists? These are just a few potential questions that an exploration of other police genres could explore.

Identifying the problem and attempting to provide potential solutions for this genre leads to the broader implications of this study. For years, there have been much needed calls for diversity on-screen with regard to race, gender, sexuality and various other aspects of identity. Sometimes, it had been successful. This study has revealed, though, that the politics of representation does not only come down to casting decisions, especially with regards to stories about the place of law enforcement in American society. Some may assume that inserting Black police officers into a predominately white genre or inserting women into a predominantly masculine genre would change buddy-cop films for the better. For some moments within *Bad Boys II* and *The Heat* it does, but mostly, it does not. This is because the films still rely on depictions of aggression and violence towards suspects that are central to how humor and action

are created within the genre. This suggests that Hollywood not only needs to diversify its casting practices in police films, but also the kinds of stories it tells.

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