Dead-End Days: The Sacrifice of Displaced Workers on Film

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Race, Class, and Gender on Film

CLASS CONFLICTS ANIMATE THOUSANDS OF
HOLLYWOOD MOVIES;[1] and analysts have been
writing of films as American mythology for de-
cades,[2] arguing that cinema performs a "Bardic
function singing back to society lullabies about
what a large hegemonic part of it 'already
knows'" (McCarthy et al. 229). Movies, on this
theory, interact with both their producers and
their consumers. They become realms of public
discourse, turning social problems into *myths*—
objects of ritual consumption by crowds gath-
ered to rehearse their troubles. I analyze one
such cycle, composed of seven contemporary
films that either occur during or culminate in
tense, hot days and feature standoffs between
armed breadwinners and the law. This cycle
presents explicit class conflict, informed by
tensions over gender and race. It tells stories of
violence by and against working-class protes-
tors, as part of a myth of dreams undone by the
twin forces of a tight labor market and a well-
armed police. The myth arose in the U.S. during
the late-twentieth-century economic down-
turns; and it frames working-class protests over
unemployment as morally sympathetic, racially
marked, and bound for stylized bloodshed.

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A Film Cycle

The seven films at the core of this study (*Do the
Right Thing* [1989], *Dog Day Afternoon* [1975],
Falling Down [1992], *John Q* [2002], *Mad City*
[1997], *The Negotiator* [1998], and *Set It Off*
[1996])—all but one released during the last
fifteen years—give voice to working-class angst
and then blow most of their (anti)heroes away;
and they do so in a manner that distinguishes
them from other films with related subplots.[3]
They dramatize the agonizing conflicts in public
between working-class protestors, the families
from which they have grown estranged, and the
police arrayed against them, with few unrelated
subplots to distract the viewer. The stories be-
gin with breadwinner stress, move to territorial
conflict as protagonists fight for public space,
pause for speeches about dispossession and
desperation, and conclude with the visible in-
jury or death of the protestors by the end of the
dead-end day.

Many other films have worked with these
themes without qualifying for the core set,
which leads me to propose a two-sphere model
of a *film cycle:* a core of films (seven in this
case) that exemplify the cycle, and a periphery
composed of related films, each of which in-
cludes some aspect of the core. If the patterns
in the core set are robust, then they should
appear in the periphery as well, even though
the larger group was not constructed under the
self-aware conditions of genre production. The
collective social psychology that governs the
production of dead-end day films informs many
movies, such that the patterns evinced in the

core tell us something of the cultural conditions in which we have been living. I propose, then, to comment on mass U.S. consciousness by interpreting overt patterns in our film mythology.

The dead-end day story has roots in the mid-twentieth century, in a series of westerns and other action melodramas that take place on long, hot days. Way back in 1940, for instance, *His Girl Friday* offered an early version of this story in a small subplot—a mere harbinger of the late-twentieth-century trend. In that film's backstory, a hapless white prole has gone bananas and shot a black police officer. As a snide reporter tells the story, the assailant, Williams, is "a bookkeeper. He starts in at $20 a week and after fourteen years he gradually works himself up to $17.50 . . . The McClusky company goes out of business and Williams loses his job." At that point, unmoored and wandering a park by day, Williams has shot a cop.

Later, from the prison cell where he awaits his execution, on the long day of the movie's action, Williams explains himself in a manner that would become typical of the heroes to follow decades later: "[Shooting that cop] is against everything I've ever stood for. They know it was an accident. I'm not guilty. It's- it's just the world." Williams survives the movie, but just barely. *His Girl Friday* is a peripheral film, and it keeps Williams's story to the sideline. However, during the last dozen years of the twentieth century, several movies followed the lead of the 1975 film *Dog Day Afternoon* and put such heroes front and center.

In 1992's *Falling Down,* an employee as unbalanced as poor Williams loses his job and his grip on "the world" that frustrates his attempts to sustain family and dignity. He responds with an urban shooting spree. Analysts of *Falling Down* (Clover "*Falling Down*"; Davies; Dyer "White"; McCarthy et al.; Williams; Zilberg) variously conclude that this update of the unemployed-berserker film represents Hollywood's nationalist-racist backlash; associates white manhood with death; or depicts privileged people coming unhinged in hard times. This essay builds upon those interpretations but emphasizes the sense of the ritual with which dead-end day movies put their heroes down. *Falling Down* is part of a small set of movies produced in increasing number over the last fifteen years (1975, 1989, 1992, and the other four between 1996 and 2002): it tells the story of violence born of class conflict in an economy unkind to its workers. Bill Foster, the white protagonist of *Falling Down,* endures a day of family, job, and intergroup conflicts that culminates in a suicidal fight with police. In this respect he resembles the urban warriors who occupy buildings and/or take hostages in the other six core dead-end day films. I focus on these seven as a coherent cycle born of a particular period of economic lost ground. They constitute a contemporary urban myth of economic angst, race relations, and state violence.

Photo 1: William Foster (Michael Douglas) tries out his rocket launcher in *Falling Down.* Photo courtesy of Warner Brothers.

Social Problems, Violence, and Myth

By focusing on such problems, dead-end day movies address public concerns that, while hardly unique to the late-twentieth century, attained some urgency in political discourse at that time. For instance, the presidential elections of 1996—the year in which these films began to appear with greater regularity—saw reactionary candidate Pat Buchanan drop his Republican-party deference to the rich. From the stump, he decried not only immigration by Latinos from the south but also corruption among executives in boardrooms, who pocketed company profits while they fired their longtime workers. People tend to search for villains during economic hard times (Calavita), and though the boom of the late 1990s buoyed the fortunes of those with capital, it did far less for those easily laid off from their blue-collar factory and service jobs. The period left over 25 percent of U.S. households with net assets below ten thousand dollars (Montalto). Between 1973 and 1993, the buying power of U.S. wages declined by 14 percent, and then rebounded only 7 percent by 2000. These net decreases hit the working class hardest. At the bottom of the income distribution, both absolute and relative incomes fell, leaving the rich relatively richer but the poor worse off in many ways than before (Wolff). Even middle-class citizens learned to fear bankruptcy, as the buying power of their wages remained flat and easy lines of consumer credit tempted them into financial straits. Rates of personal bankruptcy quadrupled during the 1990s (Sullivan, Warren, and Westbrook 243).

These events at the very end of the century merely extended trends begun during the 1960s. The ten years that culminated with the 1975 release of *Dog Day Afternoon,* the first dead-end day film, saw not only a doubling of rates of crime and divorce and the loss of the Vietnam War, but also the beginning of the deindustrialization of the inner cities and the creation of an underclass that would lose ground while a professional class continued to

benefit from higher education. This polarization of the nation's wealth and income accelerated during the 1980s, when the Reagan revolution deregulated U.S. commerce, freeing the executives (whom Buchanan would later vilify) to waste hundreds of billions in luxuries and bad investments while the earnings of blue-collar workers diminished.

Dead-end heroes shake their fists at such a world, hoping that their audiences might be moved by their plights. And perhaps moviegoers are, given the mythic function that film can serve by addressing widely shared anger and fears. Analysts of narrative film have argued that the medium can address troubles in ways that communities might find meaningful because it involves repetition and ritual, public spectacle, and the affirmation of values and the placing of blame (V. Sobchack; T. Sobchack). Writing of great movie cycles, Thomas Sobchack observes that "the only twentieth-century art that has consistently reenacted the ritual of reaffirmation of group values has been the genre film. Simply enough, it is the form of the genre film, its repetitive quality, its familiarity, and violent plotting that has made this work" (109–10). These films constitute the myths of a secular religion in which communities gather for blood sacrifices. Crowds assemble, onscreen and off, to watch iconic characters suffer for the way our societies operate—for the way "the world" is—to be moved by their plight, and to affirm the community for which they give their lives.

The presentation of class in film has been complex, involving a tension between acknowledgement and avoidance in a society in which nearly all people regard themselves as "middle class," as able to realize their dreams through force of will.[4] Despite the history of Hollywood's neglect of class conflict, however, these films dive deep into the issue, telling stories rife with intergroup tensions and a vivid use of law enforcement to squelch working-class protest. This paper considers these seven violent, political films as myth, with much to teach us about a collective view of social problems. They

dramatize a view of inequality in the US: that companies care little for their workers, that working-class rage cuts across lines of race and gender, that blacks handle it better, that police fire upon those who protest their situations, and that blacks will more likely survive.

Plot Lines: Spurned Breadwinners and (White) Lunacy

Each of these seven movies either spans or culminates in a long, hot day, during which protagonists lament their disenfranchisement after occupying some public place by force. Police attack after heroes appeal to others with tales of alienation or breadwinner woe. Even before the hostage dramas erupt, however, their tragic heroes face problems with sanity, employment, and families, all linked.

None of these heroes are self-employed or members of the owning class, and there is no such thing as secure and high-status work for them. Everyone else has either lost a job, lost benefits, lost wages, or faces such losses. These characters then connect their job troubles to their family lives, as they worry over paying bills and spending time with loved ones. The hero of *John Q,* beloved by his family, worries over capitalists "shipping all them jobs off to Mexico." He takes inspiration when his son, after watching the family car repossessed and his parents' rising alarm at their financial state, cheers, "I'd get so big and mad I'd just go crazy and kick someone's butt!" Nearly all of these characters either have family to support or voice their shame that they do not.

A racial pattern arises in the ways these displaced breadwinners cope with their troubles. Some approach lunacy, for instance, and they are more likely to be white. Sonny, the bank robber in *Dog Day Afternoon,* seems hapless in the face of his dual family demands (two wives, no job). Stress has pushed him to the limit of his senses. His partner in armed robbery seems even crazier, ready to die for no obvious reason. Bill, in *Falling Down,* seems bent on a family homicide-suicide binge and has lived the life
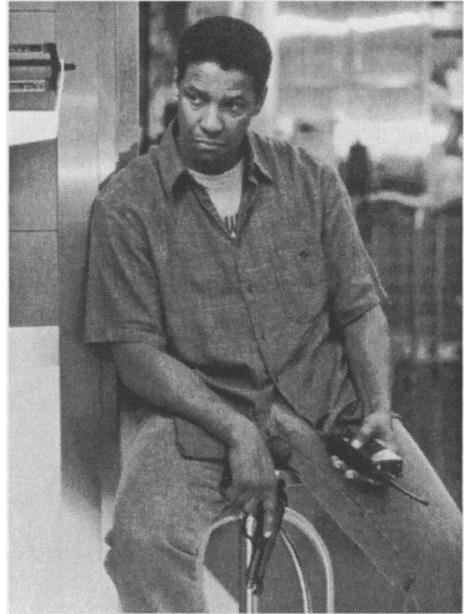

Photo 2: John Quincy Archibald (Denzel Washington) takes a hospital's emergency room hostage in *John Q.* Photo courtesy of New Line Home Entertainment.

of a pathological liar following the loss of his job. His mother and ex-wife both describe him as edging toward violence.

However, not all of these heroes seem so out of sorts. Most black protagonists—the delivery man in *Do the Right Thing,* the janitors of *Set It Off,* the cop hero of *The Negotiator,* and the beleaguered factory worker in *John Q*—seem articulate, able to discuss the larger forces that hamper them. Cleo, in *Set It Off,* notes wistfully that the factory across the street no longer employs people like herself. She cleans pricey condos for a living and knows from the beginning of the story that she and her friends must buck the system that consigns them to poverty if they are ever to escape. Mundane economic disenfranchisement drives her; no lunacy is needed. We therefore find a small pattern—a link between blackness and sanity—among these heroes.[5] This racial pattern grows more clear as the action heats up.

Violence

Violence by the Dispossessed

Protagonists lapse into thievery and violence as they grow more desperate, though the turns to crime vary by race. White heroes begin their malfeasance as soon as we meet them. Black heroes in the other four films, however, endure onscreen frustration or abuse—usually police violence—before they turn to crime. Bill Foster, the angriest white male of *Falling Down,* is harried in a way that draws amused recognition from city dwellers, but is also prepared to murder his estranged wife and child after shooting helpless opponents in cold blood. He is a stalker, a would-be family killer, and xenophobe to boot.

By contrast, all but one of the black protesters seems more careful and clear headed. Though one attacks a man to protest a slight, the rest do so only to defend themselves. They frighten and offend people by occupying public places by force, but most of them also earn sympathy by pleading their cases with steady voices and clear minds. For instance, the young women of *Set It Off* are variously fired and harassed, and one is stripped of child by a social worker, before they turn to armed robbery. Thus this cycle figures white men as crazier, more prone to cracking under the pressure of losing their status as patriarchs.[6]

Conflicts boil over once our heroes claim public space and force people to hear their complaints. The most often repeated images include the heroes' monologues on their frustrations, holding guns on frightened civilians, shouting at police. *Falling Down*'s Bill complains of having been laid off and of being unable to support his child. He lashes out at a society that's betrayed working Americans: "You should be rewarded for that. Instead they give it to the plastic surgeons. You know, they lied to me." Earlier, Bill sees a black man who could not obtain a loan and who shouts to passersby, "They told me that I was not economically viable!" Police hustle this protestor away, but not before he says to Bill (and, given the camera's position, to the audience as well), "Don't forget

me." Bill nods, a connection made. Soon, however, Bill will threaten his family and murder a man in defense of his "rights." Eventually, the police will come.

Violence by the Police

Though occasionally heroic, dead-end day cops represent organized white-male violence—the institution that brings the hammer down on those who decry their losses. Many heroes gain sympathy, but at some point each of these movies bursts into frenzied activity, usually when protagonists snap and commence their violence, or when police retaliate with assaults of their own. The editing speeds up, the volume rises, and bodies race across the screen. These breaks from long takes on protagonists signal the final passages of the movies, in which the protestors will lose their footing in their standoffs and (mostly) die. Police shoot or strangle protesters in six of the seven films, killing nearly all of them. Most of those make a theme of police violence throughout their stories, with scenes of officers engaged in everything from the mockery of black citizens to brutality and murder.[7] The climax of *Do the Right Thing* features enraged black New Yorkers who shout "Howard Beach!" at murderous cops, to invoke a real-world lynching of blacks by whites. The bank-robbing hero of *Dog Day Afternoon* draws cheers as he derides police for brutality ("Attica! Attica!"). With few exceptions, police officers in these films appear foolish or ominously oppressive. They are dangerous to protestors.[8]

Dead-end day movies make use of vivid violence. The least explicit is *Mad City,* which cuts to the classically designed museum steps whenever someone takes a mortal wound. The dais and grand staircase of the museum resemble an altar. There we see a shot-gunned man fall, his blood smearing the white marble, and later a sympathetic reporter blown off his feet by the explosion that kills the protagonist behind him—each man placed on the pedestal before the audience, like a sacrificial goat. In each case someone will die, but off screen; we see only these stylized presentations of bleeding men on the platforms that focus the

attention of onlookers. The crowds who witness these violent moments seem rapt indeed, and each moment has lessons to teach. Though exceptional for leaving most of the bloodshed off screen, *Mad City* sets the sacramental tone for bloodshed in the cycle.

The other acts of violence in these movies proceed either on the Kurosawa-Peckinpah model of slow-motion, multiple-camera montages, with blood squibs to mark the many gunshot wounds (*Set It Off* and *The Negotiator*),[9] or medium close shots of single bullet hits (*Dog Day Afternoon, Falling Down, John Q*). *Do the Right Thing* employs a series of medium shots and closeups on the dying Raheem and the cops who strangle him. These explicit and stylized deaths seem appropriate, given the sacrificial nature of the films. Though our centrally governed society keeps its capital punishment and cruel treatment behind locked gates and doors, our entertainment media place their dramatic versions front and center, flaunting the ritual blood sacrifice that our legal system hides. Having outraged the law and challenged the civic and market forces arrayed against them, dead-end heroes bleed and die, their final moments made vivid so that the moral instruction may be profound. This is the quasi-religious character of modern film: the use of viscerally affecting, and thus minimally involving, bloodshed in ritual violence in order to teach moral lessons. This does not mean that we must approve of the shootings and slayings, any more than we need champion the victims' causes. Our responses, however ambivalent or detached, will simply be shaped by the fact of having watched these protesters be wounded and killed. They play the role of scapegoat on the public alter, where the blood spilled can color the lessons taught. These lessons bear on displaced breadwinners and the awesome violence used to put them down.

Here, the racial pattern recurs. Among the protestors, blacks fare best: as hostage-taking, even murderous protagonists, they are more articulate, more poised, more aggrieved, and more likely to survive than whites. The details of the violence against protestors illustrate this racial difference. Karen Cerulo (40–50) describes four ways in which various media structure accounts of violence: 1) a *performer* sequence, which begins with mention of the perpetrator of the violence—usually used in news reports and artistic portrayals of normal or lawful violence, as in shootings by real-life police; 2) a *victim* sequence, beginning with mention of the casualty—usually used in descriptions of deviant violence; 3) a *contextual* sequence, which leads with details of the situation and preceding events—often to convey controversial violence such as suicide; and 4) a *doublecast* sequence, portraying the perpetrator as a victim as well—also used for violence with moral ambiguity. Cerulo analyzes the appearance of these sequences in popular film as well as news reports, visual art, and novels.

The four sequences—performer, victim, contextual, and doublecast—appear in this set of movies in a patterned manner (see table 1). That is, black protagonists are mostly attacked within victim sequences, those used to depict deviant violence. The scenes begin with the victims and focus on their experiences at the hands of anonymous white cops.[10] Three white protagonists, however, die in contextual and doublecast sequences, suggesting that violence against them is more ambiguous, less deviant. The death of Sal in *Dog Day Afternoon* stands out as a doublecast sequence; he has spoken of his desire to kill everyone around in a suicide binge, and has been holding his gun on hostages when the police shoot him. However, the scene is also shot from the point of view of the cop who kills Sal, and thus it has elements of the performer sequencing usually employed to depict normal or lawful violence. Yet another doublecast sequence closes *Falling Down*, in which the murderous protestor incites a cop to shoot him in a duel. A contextual-sequence suicide ends *Mad City*, in which the performer's growing desperation and entrapment within his predicament has provided a dominant theme. Even in such a small set of films, the racial difference in presentation of violence is striking.[11] The shooting of whites occurs in contexts composed and edited to suggest moral ambiva-

Table 1

Film	Protagonist	Job status	Family	Crime	Violence against	Sequencing of violence against	Punishment	Reward
Do the Right Thing (1989)	Black ♂ Mookie	employed	girlfriend, kid	vandalism	none	na	unemployment	
	Black ♂ Raheem	not clear		assault	strangled to death	victim	death	
Dog Day Afternoon (1975)	White ♂ Sonny	unemployed	2 wives, 2 kids	armed robbery	arrested	victim	imprisonment	
	White ♂ Sal	unemployed		armed robbery	shot to death	doublecast	death	
Falling Down (1992)	White ♂ Bill	laid off	ex-wife, ex-kid	assault, kidnapping, homicide	shot to death	doublecast	death	
John Q (2002)	Black ♂ John	part-time	wife, kid	kidnapping	wounded by gunfire	victim	imprisonment	kid's survival
Mad City (1997)	White ♂ Sam	laid off	wife, 2 kids	kidnapping, homicide	suicide	contextual	death	
The Negotiator (1998)	Black ♂ Danny	suspended	wife	assault, kidnapping	wounded by gunfire	contextual	injury	vindication
Set It Off (1996)	Black ♀ Stony	employed / laid off	boyfriend	armed robbery, homicide	shot at	na	exile to Mexico	escape, money
	Black ♀ Frankie	fired / employed / laid off		armed robbery, homicide	shot to death	victim	death	
	Black ♀ Cleo	employed / laid off	girlfriend	armed robbery, homicide	shot to death	victim	death	
	Black ♀ Tisean	employed / laid off	kid	armed robbery, homicide	shot to death	victim	death	

lence, sometimes even a sense of justice done. Attacks on black protestors, however, are nearly always presented in the terms of deviance. Black heroes ought not to be killed.

Discussion: Protest, Race, and Death

What should we make of racial differences in character and victimage in this small set of movies? First, one might wonder whether an abject racial otherness had been projected onto working-class whites by a racist film industry that wished to appear superficially unprejudiced. Analysts have noted the stigma historically applied to black film characters, who are portrayed as mindlessly savage or sacrificially nurturing, oversexed or neutered, but rarely as the complex, center-of-attention heroes that white men tend to portray onscreen (Bogle; Snead). However, Clover notes a trend, in rape-revenge movies, in which films apply stigma formerly reserved for Indians and blacks to a crudely stereotyped "redneck," who does "multiple duty for the lot" (*Chain Saws* 135). In fact, Clover regards "the displacement of ethnic otherness onto a [working] class of whites [as] far and away the most significant 'ethnic' development in popular culture of the 1980s" (135n21). Newitz finds the same pattern in serial-killer films, in which crude rednecks savage effete, professional-class whites, but die in the end. These depictions of savagery cannot help but recall older images of bloodthirsty "redskins" and rapacious blacks. Their deaths can bring to mind centuries of genocide and lynching by whites. Newitz wonders what white politics might underlie this melodrama. Have white moviegoers learned to savor fantasies of their own punishment rather than address racial problems? The humiliations inflicted upon unsympathetic whites "suggest that the only progressive task available to white anti-racists is a kind of contemplative self-destruction . . . in a way that creates a spectacle of their own humiliation—but little more" (Newitz 150). Displacements and evasions allow whites to rehearse bloodthirsty fantasies of the rage of the oppressed as well as sadistic reprisals by white

mobs and the law, without having to acknowledge our complex racial history.

Richard Dyer suggests that *Falling Down* speaks to a related fear of white reproductive failure and death (217–18). Like the other doomed white men, Bill Foster cannot keep his family together. He has lost contact with his only child as well as his wife, and he ends the film by provoking a cop to shoot him. Blacks, in dead-end day movies, have less problem holding onto their families. Only one black protagonist loses a child (Tisean, in *Set It Off,* who loses custody and then dies trying to regain it); whereas each white protagonist with a child loses contact by the end of his story (see table 1). Dyer notes that white people seem pallid, emotionless, and bound for early graves in a number of film genres; zombie and vampire films, for example, often feature monsters who are whiter than white. Dead-end day films seem to point in the same direction, dooming white protestors to reproductive failure and death more often than blacks, associating criminal carelessness with white outrage more often than with that of blacks. Though these films employ Hollywood star power—likable, bankable icons—in central roles (Jada Pinkett and Queen Latifah in *Set It Off,* Denzel Washington in *John Q,* John Travolta in *Mad City,* Samuel L. Jackson in *The Negotiator,* Al Pacino in *Dog Day Afternoon,* Spike Lee in *Do the Right Thing,* and Michael Douglas in *Falling Down*), the blacks who launch the major protests fare better than the whites, on all fronts: they are more likely to reunite with family, more likely to keep jobs and any money gained, and more likely to survive. Dyer finally argues that *Falling Down* and the other spectacles of death-bound whiteness suggest "a feeling that deep down whites are nothing and have had their day" ("White" 222).

On the other side of the race divide, Kwame Anthony Appiah notes the tendency in contemporary films to feature blacks as "saints" (81). Danny Glover, Whoopie Goldberg, Morgan Freeman, and Denzel Washington play sympathetic heroes and supporters time and again, with few dangerous exceptions on their resumés. Appiah argues that portrayals of subordinate groups

(in this case, blacks) as villains may be less damaging than some fear, and their presentations as paragons less helpful than some hope. Though dead-end day protestors are not saints (even taking into account John Q's flirtation with martyrdom), this set of movies suggests a rough equation between black protagonists and virtue, providing yet another way for Hollywood to draw racial lines. Perhaps, Appiah suggests, whites believe that suffering ennobles the oppressed and like to see this affirmed in the presentation of blacks on screen (83). Certainly it could make their subordination seem less outrageous. (Stereotypes of white trash seem to carry the same message—that white poverty is more outrageous because blacks handle it with more grace; see Hartigan.) The oppressed will always be with us, we might tell ourselves, and it's good for their character anyway. Following such a train of thought, one could soon arrive at the slaveholder's belief that Africans were built for rough trade and submission. With less of a historical leap, one might still wonder whether Sidney Poitier and Denzel Washington made careers (probably the only Hollywood paths open to them) portraying to whites the positive effects of their subordination. Race and class come intertwined in our popular culture, just as they do in our society; and this set of films, trading in sacrificial lambs, keeps its black ones on the noble side. Poor whites are crazy, the cycle implies, while poor blacks are just black.

Other genres evince similar racial patterns. Virtuous minorities reform hostile white men in cop action movies (which genre includes both *Falling Down* and *The Negotiator*). Many of these films feature white male heroes, often both racist and misogynist, whose gentle and nurturing sidekicks help them to change their hostile ways (King). A great deal of white attention-seeking and guilt seem to have inspired the patterns in cop action movies. Black male sidekicks, for instance, usually serve as therapeutic angels, reshaping the personalities of white male heroes into forms acceptable to a multicultural workplace. And, as further expression of white guilt and self-centered angst, the

criminals whom these cops hunt are bad white men. They are often wealthy versions of the crazy protagonists of dead-end day movies. The racist and woman-hating Aryans manifest extreme versions of the white heroes' disorders. Heroes then show off their killing skills by blowing their loony counterparts away. This dead-end day set offers little of the "free therapy" between heroes and sidekicks, but it does feature police violence against unhinged white males, and it does pose blacks and women as more virtuous and somewhat less deserving of death. Work and family problems afflict us all, these film cycles seem to suggest, but blacks tend to handle the stress better. White men appear to feel more entitled and thus more violent when denied what they regard as their birthrights.

The latest wave of the cop action cycle dates from the early 1980s, since which time production has been steady and the movies quite popular. The cycle speaks to the same period of corporate downsizing, high rates of divorce, toughening law enforcement, and stagnated working-class wages. These movies play to audiences hardened by news of corruption, scandals in high offices, and a sense of moral battles lost. Like cop action movies, dead-end day films voice working-class pain and aim plenty of firepower at unhinged white men.

Ultimately, class binds dead-end day heroes, however much race and gender may divide them. All of these movies feature the chaotic scenes of confrontation between the authorities and the hapless proles. All give characters unhappy work lives and suicidal tailspins. These films acknowledge working-class frustrations and suggest that the loss of breadwinner status can unbalance workers (especially white ones), who may die trying to find decent jobs and better lives through public confrontation. We learn from these movies that such characters come into conflict with others when they claim their lost status, but can draw sympathy with tales of working-class woe. We learn that these heroes retain more sympathy when they stick to calls for better jobs or fairer treatment rather than expressing anger or dispersing

wealth by force. When they stage disruptive challenges to class systems, heroes can liven the screen and make for high drama, but must cede the sympathy of their audiences. Crossing lines of peaceable protest, they draw armed response, the most visible proof of the higher powers that rule us all.[12]

These movies evoke varied responses, as viewers cast about for safe places to direct their empathy. *Do the Right Thing* struck fear in white pundits, who predicted that blacks would riot in imitation (though the summer of 1989 simply saw more police murders of blacks on the streets of New York City).[13] *Falling Down* befuddled many viewers, who didn't know whether to champion Bill Foster or to condemn him as a nut.[14] *John Q*'s viewers wondered whether a kidnapper in a hospital wasn't scarier, especially in a post-9/11 world, than the tight-fisted HMOs he detested. Viewers seemed to sympathize with these heroes but not with their violence, at least not always. Whether sharp-minded blacks (*John Q, The Negotiator, Set It Off*) or dim-witted whites (*Dog Day Afternoon, Falling Down, Mad City*), they amount to sacrifices to a system built to defeat them. We watch their struggles and see most fail.

Dead-end day movies rein in their heroes and antiheroes, give them space to tell their stories, and then shut their traps. One couldn't accuse these movies of painting rosy pictures of workers' struggles easily won. The picture remains bleak as U.S. moviegoers confront, through their popular culture, a forbidding constraint on their American dreams. "It's just the world," and it is unforgiving. Way back in *His Girl Friday,* hapless Williams, sentenced to die, tells his listener what he heard in a park where he loitered, unemployed and miserable, until he shot a cop one day. He heard a speech on "production for use." "Everything should be made use of," he recalls. Williams liked that speaker, and with the help of his interrogator, he turns the phrase into his motive for urban violence. The gun he carried for no reason should be made use of, just as his laborer's hands, left idle too long, ought to have been put to work. By this time, poor Williams is in

way over his head, and, like a typical protestor (white ones, at least), seems not to understand all that he says, much less that others toy with his fate for their own reasons. He will not rise above the status of a victim whose plight makes a moving spectacle. The world has little use for such workers and will not be changed by their protests, though they might be moved by the spectacle of the violence against them. We sing many hymns to lost heroes in secular entertainment; this set of movies comprises but one.

Traditional religion—altered by the rise of mass communication, easy transport, and secular government—has had to join consumer-choice popular culture. Secular entertainment (craven Hollywood, in this case) has merged with religion to serve many of its functions and encroach on its turf. "Mass media share dramaturgical structures, formulaic incantations, and constant repetition with traditional systems of cultural authority," write analysts of civil religion in the U.S. (Marvin and Ingle 139). In this set of movies we find a formula for dramatic tales of oppression and sacrifice, in which mortals grapple with limits placed upon them, their covenants with the world broken. Protestors shake their fists at awesome powers (the industries that forsake them and the state that guns them down) before falling in front of us like sacrificial goats. These tragic heroes, if they think through their troubles, blame an economy that makes little use of their skills. We might conclude that the popularity of this gritty story since the 1990s indicates a shift in class consciousness (progressive or not) and a desire to see society's most awful dramas played out, to reckon the costs of our ways of doing business, in a manner evocative of religious rites. The Bill Fosters and John Qs pay the price of the good fortune of others, put down by the powers that run our lives. These movies can help the rest of us fear those mighty forces, know their mercy, and work another day.

NOTES

1. Conflicts between classes imbue such genres and cycles as *cop action,* in which upper-class criminals

menace working-class cops (Ames; Brown; King; Pfeil); *war,* in which working-class men risk their lives for country (Hodgkins; Prince; Schatz); *gangster,* in which working-class young men make their fortunes in cities stacked against them (Munby; Rafter; Shadoian); and *musical,* in which working-class youth attain stardom (Dyer "Only Entertainment"; Miller).

2. See Aronowitz; Ehrenreich; Kleinhans; Lyman.

3. I refer to the protesting hostage-takers as "heroes" for convenience, with the caveat that the protagonists of some of these movies hardly count as heroes in the sense of being virtuous or able to surmount obstacles. These characters are just as easily termed tragic heroes, in some cases even villains.

4. Jameson argues that *Dog Day Afternoon* contributes to class consciousness not by depicting inequality explicitly in the storyline (which he regards as hampered by Al Pacino's method-acting emphasis on individual quirkiness) but by casting bland television actors as the "figuration" of faceless bureaucrats of multinational capitalism (729).

5. Peripheral films uphold this association of white men with venal crime. Working-class male breadwinners take hostages for money in such recent outlier films as *Breakdown* (1997), *Ransom* (1996), and *Panic Room* (2002). They deliver speeches about class conflict, revel in their victimization of the privileged, and then most of them die for their crimes. The single black kidnapper, in *Panic Room,* survives after proving to be nobler than his white partners in crime. Only in *Normal Life* do we meet a crazy woman who turns to crime without first being aggrieved by the actions of others.

6. Peripheral films uphold this pattern as well. White men take hostages and occupy public spaces out of frustration in *Higher Learning* (1995), *Trespass* (1992), and *Taps* (1981). They all wind up dead or regretful, and are often portrayed as villainous or misguided. However, the white women of *Thelma and Louise* endure harassment and sexual assault, and the black man in *Ragtime* has been humiliated and wants to avenge a wife murdered by malicious white firefighters and cops. Recourse to the law denied, he turns to terrorism. He gives eloquent speeches on his right to his dignity, and then sacrifices himself to police bullets. White men are the least likely to be heroes in such stories.

7. By the time they die, most of the bank robbers in *Set It Off* have had a chance to impress others with their plight. Cleo goes down in slow motion, guns blazing, in a police trap, before a television audience. Frankie, fired from her job as a bank teller over a mistaken belief that she had aided thieves, faces down the police officer responsible for her gang's desperation. This cop had not only supervised the "mistaken" killing of her friend's innocent, college-bound brother, he had also cast his unfounded suspicion on Frankie in the first place, costing her that precious job. Having

made a case for her injured status and his responsibility for it, she turns to run, only to be gunned down by the squad of police typically on hand when protestors take their stands. The cop is white, and all of his victims are working class and black, making the racial stakes clear.

8. Only two films finish without police killings. *Mad City* concludes with its protestor's suicide, and only *John Q* ends without fatality. Police have already tried to kill John, shooting him in the shoulder. Wounded and despairing, he draws to within a hair's breadth of sacrificial suicide. Like Sonny in *Dog Day Afternoon,* he goes to prison for his crimes.

9. See Prince for a general discussion.

10. Exceptions to this presentation of violence against blacks as deviant are the doublecast sequences of Raheem's death in *Do the Right Thing* (he has just tried to strangle a white man and is in turn choked to death by a white cop); and the wounding at the end of *The Negotiator* by another white cop, which turns out to be a ploy, albeit a brutal one, to save the victim's life (the performer must convince a more murderous assailant that the protestor—the film's hero—is already dead).

11. Outlier movies such as *Breakdown, Higher Learning, Normal Life, Panic Room, Ransom,* and *Trespass* confirm this pattern. In each, white male criminals die for their crimes, some at their own hands to escape police custody, others by hostile gunfire, but none of them in victim sequences that would suggest any deviant nature to their killings. Most die in perpetrator sequences, as though the violence turned against them were normal. In contrast, the black hero of *Ragtime,* having held a firefighter and the Getty museum hostage, dies in a victim sequence. He is spoken of with respect by other major characters. The white women of *Thelma and Louise* also die by their own hands in a victim sequence that makes them heroes.

12. Adventures such as *The Fugitive* (1993) and *The Game* (1997), released during the period of the dead-end day cycle, offer counterexamples to the class-bound fates of dead-end heroes. Each features a wealthy, white professional whose life turns upside down. Both heroes find comfort with family or newfound supporters at the conclusions, even though both have picked up guns, done violence in public, and frightened crowds in public places on desperate urban evenings. The difference, in these upper-crust movies, is that oppressors reveal themselves to have played tricks upon the heroes, cheating them of the privileges that appear as birthrights. For instance, I see a lesson in the comparison of two disenfranchised Michael Douglas characters, one holding up the Whammy Burger in *Falling Down,* the other pleading for help in a dusty diner and later threatening his harassers at gunpoint in *The Game.* Each, passing through dumpy eateries, asks for help: "Anybody?"

they plead. *Falling Down*'s proletarian will die for his pains, a laid-off worker with little to show for his decades of service; the rich man in *The Game* will find spiritual renewal. Perhaps movies with urban protest–hostage plots haven't room for both of these men alive. The workers must live in misery or die, while the well-off may find renewal.

13. For a review of the reception and controversy, see Williams 164.

14. For a brief review, see Clover, "*Falling Down*."

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