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The Evolution of African American Artists' Music in American Cinema

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## ABSTRACT

Throughout the history of the American cinema, African American artists' music has been used in thousands of films. There are many purposes to choose to score a film with African American artists' music and in this thesis, I will examine how the role of this music has evolved over time. Starting from a place of cultural appropriation, black artists' music in film has turned towards a state of reappropriation. Through various films such as, *Nothing But a Man*, *Killer of Sheep*, *The Big Chill*, *Waves* and more, and selected scholarship by Claudia Gorbman, James O. Young, Ray Black, and others, I will analyze the relationship between film and the use of black artists' music over time through theories of cultural appropriation, reappropriation, and neorealism.

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## Introduction

Throughout the history of American cinema, film has been an instrumental tool used to not only create art but has also been used to comment on political and racial issues. As talkies gained popularity in Hollywood, the audio aspect of a film became as much of a necessity as the visual. It was not until closer to the 1960s when African Americans were able to tell their own stories through film, even if it was to a much smaller audience than large Hollywood films. With a rise in African American cinema, the use of black artists' music in films also saw a rise in popularity. Over the course of cinema's history, black artists' music has been used in many different ways for many different purposes. The evolution of black artists' music used in film has undergone many transformations, but at the core of each usage lies the ideas of cultural appropriation, reappropriation, or a neorealist approach. Many films culturally appropriate black music by having white characters or white filmmakers take ownership over the sound, while other films go into production with the intention of bringing attention to issues of appropriation. An important distinction between these ideas however is the choice of the music to be diegetic or non-diegetic as Claudia Gorbman explains in her book *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*. If a filmmaker chooses to make black artists' music diegetic in a scene, the story, characters, and intentions of the filmmaker are completely different than if the same music were non diegetic (Gorbman 1). These ideas of black artists' music being diegetic versus non diegetic are explored in films such as *The Big Chill* and *Nothing But a Man*.

Film was not always of importance in black culture, as American cinema was almost exclusively white in its first 20 to 30 years of life. Music, however, holds tremendous importance in black culture, as music has always been accessible to everyone. This leads to a certain power

held by black artists' music, so when it is used in a film, it says something about the filmmaker using it, white or black. Black music in film takes on the role of the acousmètre, as described by Michel Chion in his book, "Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen" (Chion, 2019).

"Acousmètre - a kind of voice-character specific to cinema that derives mysterious powers from being heard and not seen. The disembodied voice seems to come from everywhere and therefore to have no clearly defined limits to its power...

...Acousmètre depends for its effects on delaying the fusion of sound and image to the extreme, by supplying the sound - almost a voice - and withholding the image of the sound's true source until nearly the very end of the film. Only then, when the audience has used its imagination to the fullest is the real identity of the sound revealed, almost always with an accompanying loss of imagined power. As long as we can't see whom we attribute all-seeing power to the voice, but once inscribed in the visual field he loses his aura (as the wizard in the Wizard of Oz and HAL in 2001)" (Chion, 2019)

Black artists' music takes on this all-powerful voice in films that choose to utilize it, creating a necessary bond between the audio and the visual aspects of the film. Various filmmakers such as Spike Lee and Trey Edwards Shults recognize the acousmètre and are self-aware of their films' voice, while some films fail to recognize the power that a film's voice can hold and consequently fall flat. As a white male, the goal of this thesis is to acknowledge not only the mistakes and tribulations of past films in using black artists' music, but also the new cultural possibilities that

are realized when filmmakers use black music for reappropriation and thus comment in new and creative ways on the black experience.



## Chapter 1 - *Nothing But a Man*: Neorealist Music

In Michael Roemer's 1964 film, *Nothing But a Man*, a young black man named Duff (Ivan Dixon) deals with issues of racism and white supremacy in the south. Roemer's film tackles these issues of racism and equality through various neorealist filmmaking techniques by means of ethically unobjectionable cultural appropriation. Through this filmmaking, Roemer creates a space in which the reality of black citizens in the 1960s is shown. In the film, Duff attempts to live a normal life but is constantly challenged by the closeminded world around him. He goes from working on the road to settling down and attempting to find a job to support himself and his wife (Abbey Lincoln). *Nothing But a Man* is a neorealist, documentary style film, as Duff is a very real character that faces society's racial issues that creates pressure for him and his wife. The problems that Duff faces include, but are not limited to, being driven out of a gas station attendant job for refusing to be treated poorly by the white customers, being fired for refusing to retract statements to his black coworkers about being treated with more respect, and dealing with Josie's preacher father who has accepted the racist social conventions put in place by white people to make a living. To describe *Nothing But a Man* as a neorealist film, one must first understand the origin of neorealism and what makes a film neorealist. Mark Shiel describes neorealism as "a disposition to the ontological truth of the physical, visible world" in his book, *Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City* (Shiel 9). Film neorealism came about in Italy after World War II and was observed as more of a visual truth, or a cinema of "fact" and "reconstituted reportage" according to André Bazin (Shiel 12). This type of filmmaking differed greatly from any other form of cinema at the time, employing techniques like using nonprofessional actors, documentary style filmmaking, on-location filming, natural light, and relatively simple editing (Shiel 9). The origins of this documentary style filmmaking came from

Italy's fascist regime and their understanding of film as a powerful weapon (Shiel 52). Italy quickly became a world leader in filmmaking under the fascist regime, though it left the younger generations to "lament what they saw as an increasingly dull bourgeois complacency" (Shiel 52). The younger generations felt "...Overrun by comedies, literary melodramas and historical epics (and) the cinema was seen to have deserted any interest in the realist representation of Italy and its people" (Shiel 52). This prompted newer filmmakers to create films using the original technique of the fascist regime, documentary style, to realistically reflect "the lives and landscapes of ordinary working-class and peasant Italians" (Shiel 52). Italian neorealism was born out of Italians' refusal to be complacent with the way they were being represented cinematically, which is an idea that has been borrowed and used elsewhere outside of Italy, in this case with Michael Roemer.

With these ideas in mind, *Nothing But a Man* employs neorealist techniques to look at the life of a black man in the 1960s. The music in the film also aides Roemer's goal of creating a film that looks at the real world, even though the music is used very sparingly. The soundtrack itself consists of mostly early 1960s hits by black Motown artists like Stevie Wonder, Eddie Holland, and Mary Wells. Many of these artists were instrumental in defining the genre of Motown and their inclusion in *Nothing But a Man* helps flesh out the world in which Duff is living. After the boom of Motown in the 60s, African American artists' music continued to grow in popularity within popular culture. This rise in popularity was not only among black audiences, but white audiences as well. In an NPR interview with Martha Reeves, lead singer of Martha and The Vandellas, Reeves explains that Motown was much more than music for black audiences (Conan 10:40). Reeves states "... we also had a message of equality. We had a message of actually enjoying music. And I don't think our music was designed for any particular people, any

particular race or creed or color or age. It's just the sound of young America, and that's what was in our label, and that's what we take pride in" (Conan 10:40). Motown music helped bring white and black audiences together and aided in the civil rights movement. In the NPR interview, many people call in to the show, reminiscing on their experiences with Motown. These experiences include Vietnam veterans explaining how Motown got them through the war, white men remembering certain performances, and various others recalling how Motown music would be blasted on a block and have everyone out in the street dancing, no matter their color. This is the true heart of Motown music, the breaking down of racial barriers and the coming together of people for the sake of music. While Motown music did aid in bringing people together, it was inherently political because it was not. Most lyrics and content of Motown songs have nothing to do with furthering equality or have a political agenda, rather they are about normal, everyday things like love and dancing. This is why Motown music works so well in Roemer's film. The music showcases what people of the time would actually be listening to.

*Nothing But a Man* is unique in that almost every scene that contains music, it is heard diegetically and completely in the background. Not only is the audience hearing the music as a soundtrack, but they are also seeing how the characters in each scene react to that same music. In the scene in which Duff goes to a bar with his father and stepmother, "Heatwave", by Martha and the Vandellas can be heard, presumably diegetically. The lyrics of "Heatwave" tell the story of a girl who is madly in love with a man and cannot get him out of her head, which is a sharp contrast to the context of the scene. Duff's father constantly berates the idea of marriage and love, all while "Heatwave" melodically plays in the background. This is neorealism at work. The lyrics and mood of the song are not meant to narrate the scene like a non-diegetic song, but rather enforce the time and place in which the characters are situated.



**Fig. 1 – Duff, his father, and his father’s mistress discuss marriage as Martha and The Vandellas’ “Heatwave” diegetically plays in the background**

This absence of commentary in the music’s lyrics is precisely why Roemer chose these songs to begin with. They help to enforce Duff and the other black people around him as normal human beings who would be listening to Motown hits like these on the radio. In other words, Duff is being seen here as truly, nothing but a man.

It must be noted that the filmmakers behind *Nothing But a Man* are two white men, Michael Roemer and Robert Young. In Judith E. Smith’s article titled *Civil Rights, Labor, and Sexual Politics on Screen in Nothing but a Man*, Smith examines Roemer and Young’s position in terms of civil rights and white supremacy (Smith 164). Smith explains that the characters of Duff and Josie came from conversations Roemer and Young had with young southern black students that had been radicalized by various civil rights protests (Smith 166). Roemer had, years after the film’s release, made a statement regarding white filmmakers who attempted to narrate

black experience: “In those days we had the gumption to think we could identify with blacks” (Smith 167). The realization that this film was written and directed by two white men can be conflicting. On one hand, the racial politics and anti-white supremacy message is prominent and helped white communities see the struggle of black communities while also giving black people characters that they could identify with in the movies. On the other hand, Roemer and Young were culturally appropriating the lives of black people in the south by taking their stories and assuming they could identify with them. However, the issues brought to light in this film regarding white supremacy in the south were needed at the time of this film’s release. According to Smith, Roemer and Young successfully bridged the struggles of whites, blacks, and Jews at this time into a story not specifically about any race but viewed “racial discrimination and black experience within segregation as part of a broader politics and struggle” (Smith 172). In a quote from Abbey Lincoln, she states that Roemer told the cast,

“‘This is not about black people necessarily. This is about oppression.’ He was a Jew.... He went through that. He knew something about oppression and the story was about how, when you are oppressed, you finally learn to oppress yourself. That’s the way it works, and he was right” (Smith 173).

Lincoln goes on to acknowledge that “It was his (Roemer’s) song that we made our own” (Smith 173). Regardless, the film is ultimately still cultural appropriation, however author James O. Young explains in his book, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, that “many acts of cultural appropriation are... ethically unobjectionable and some of them result in artworks of great aesthetic value” (Young 1). Cultural appropriation has a certain negative connotation, though

many artists engage in cultural appropriation, like Roemer and Young making a film that follows a black man's experience in the 60s by using Italian neorealist techniques (Young 1). What Roemer and Young did with black experience is something very different than what people began to do after the release of films like *Nothing But a Man*. Roemer and Young did not romanticize the time period of the early 60s, but instead called out white supremacy and racial issues while having full representation in the film with mostly all black actors playing three dimensional characters, as well as a soundtrack of all Motown hits.

## Chapter 2 -

### *The Big Chill: Cultural Appropriation*

With Motown music now being considered “oldies”, in 1983 a film titled, *The Big Chill*, released and featured a stellar soundtrack with many Motown hits, much like *Nothing But a Man*. However, while *Nothing But a Man* focuses primarily on racial issues of the 60s, *The Big Chill* uses Motown music to help a cast of white characters reminisce on their college days after their friend’s funeral. Both films grab music from the same era of Motown, but as means for different ends. *The Big Chill* uses Motown music nostalgically, with the characters actively choosing the music to feel good. Compared to Duff, he never specifically turns on music by Martha and the Vandellas or Smokey Robinson to feel good, it is just on in the background. There is no question that the film and the characters are culturally appropriating Motown music, since according to James Young, most art employs cultural appropriation in some way, but the question becomes, does *The Big Chill* culturally appropriate Motown music in a way that is problematic (Young 1)?

The film follows a group of old college friends reuniting over the suicide of one of their own. They spend the weekend catching up, laughing, crying, and listening to hits of the 1960s and early 70s. The cast features big name players before many of them had their big break including Glenn Close, Jeff Goldblum, and Kevin Kline, with the rest of the cast being also noticeably white. There is nothing wrong with a film about a group of friends reuniting after college, regardless of color. However, the issue comes in the form of the questions being asked by the accompanying soundtrack. The characters are constantly asking themselves existential questions about their own lives and remembering who they were when they were younger in the 1960s. Their problems are issues many people can relate to, but when contrasted with what black people their age went through in the 60s, their issues become miniscule. A possible

counterargument to this stance could be, “But who is comparing their experiences?” The argument to be made is that with the inclusion of certain Motown hits like “Heard it Through the Grapevine”, “Ain’t Too Proud to Beg”, and “My Girl” among many others, inherently invokes the question of what the filmmakers are trying to say by using a soundtrack made up of 18 songs, eight of which by black artists and five of those artists represented by Motown Records.

Returning to Martha Reeves’ comments on Motown music stating that it is made for everyone and meant to bring people together, *The Big Chill* only uses the songs to make the characters in the film feel good and reminisce on the 1960s (their college years) (Conan 10:40). While this is, in spirit, the right idea about Motown music, to use this soundtrack while focusing solely on a cast of white characters invokes a romanticism of the 60s. This is where *Nothing But a Man* and *The Big Chill* differ dramatically. Essentially, it comes down to the power of choice. The characters in *The Big Chill* have had a plethora of options and choices presented to them throughout their lives. In the film, the characters met while going to college at the University of Michigan, something Duff would never have the opportunity to do. Duff suffers from a lack of options that include taking demeaning jobs, letting his family starve, or physically picking cotton. The only facet of Duff’s life that he has choice over is how he acts when white people treat him disrespectfully. For instance, when Duff is working at a white owned gas station, the man whom Duff is helping tow his car continually degrades him, to which Duff does not put up with. He consequently loses his job for merely standing up for himself. Otherwise, Duff is always working, or actively trying to find work. The characters in *The Big Chill* talk about their work, but never actually do any work. They are not pressured to work in any way and although their friend just passed away, they still find the time to be jovial and take time off from work. The jobs of the characters in *The Big Chill* are middle to upper class television stars, journalists,



and real estate attorneys. The characters fail to recognize their privilege and when compared to black Americans like Duff, their problems become diminutive. This becomes apparent in one of the most memorable scenes of the film in which the cast of characters put on music to ease the stress of cleaning up the dishes.

After the group of friends finish up a well-prepared meal, three of them enter the kitchen to find a mess they have to clean up. Meanwhile, in another room, a character rifles through a large collection of albums, finally settling on The Temptations. “Ain’t Too Proud to Beg” begins to play, much to the character’s excitement as he mimics the guitar and kisses the album. As the song crescendos through the house, the cast of characters begin to dance and gladly clean up the house after their dinner. This scene is clearly meant to not only make the audience feel good, but to show the characters use of Motown music to therapeutically deal with their problems. They choose to play this song to feel good, while compared to *Nothing But a Man*, the music is only in the background of the lives of black people. With the characters in *The Big Chill*, the music reminds them of nothing but good times, while for Duff, if he were to listen to Motown again in the 80s, his memories would be full of hardship. As stated previously, the music of Motown Records is only political because it is not. The music is as happy and carefree as the characters in the film. The characters in *The Big Chill* only see Motown for what it is on the surface, music about dancing, love, and good times. The soundtrack of the film has no political songs like Marvin Gaye’s 1971 hit, “What’s Going On?” or The Temptations’ 1970 song, “Ball of Confusion”. Each of these songs encapsulates the frustration and discrimination that underrepresented people (specifically black people) felt in the late 60s and early 70s. The characters in *The Big Chill* conveniently do not choose to sing and dance to these songs, as they most likely would not make them “feel good”. While the dinner cleanup scene was one of the

only instances in the film of the characters physically picking the diegetic music, the rest of the soundtrack is meant to reflect their nostalgic music choices.

Near the end of the film, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles' song, "I Second That Emotion" plays as the group wakes up on their last day staying together. The characters wake up from a night of love-making and good times, but have to part later that day. "I Second That Emotion", in which the lyrics recount a man's want for a longer love affair than just one night, fits perfectly into the scene. Both of the scenes above are great foils to the neorealist scenes in *Nothing But a Man*, as the characters actively choose to play "Ain't Too Proud to Beg" and the lyrics of "I Second That Emotion" perfectly narrate the story of the characters. The difference again lies in choice. Kasdan chose songs that the characters would have chosen to listen to in their college years, along with songs that narrate the characters' actions. Roemer chose to include songs that were not played by Duff, but that played in the background of black bars, black neighborhoods, and black dance halls. Black Americans like Duff, specifically those living in the 60s and 70s, have been put into positions that take away their power of choice. For characters like those in *The Big Chill*, the power of choice is what grants them the carelessness and leisure that is shown in the film. The similar soundtracks of both films see Motown music being used in vastly different ways and raise the question of whether the use of culturally appropriated music is ethically objectionable.



**Fig. 2 – Kevin Kline’s character kisses a Temptations album, claiming his favorite of his collection**

Through the use of Motown and other 60s and 70s music, *The Big Chill* garnered a certain hipness that pleased audiences. The film was a relatively large box office success, as audiences enjoyed the film for its source material as well as the soundtrack. The movie itself is not evil for culturally appropriating Motown music and the success in box office sales as well as general film critics prove that. However, the ease with which the characters in the story take Motown music and accept it as their own is a cautionary tale for films of that nature in the future. Many popular films such as *The Blues Brothers* (1980) and *Soul Man* (1986) feature the same issues of white people taking black artists’ music and using it as their own, though both films were popular with audiences. These films were popular even though *Nothing But a Man* was released 20 years earlier and utilized black artists’ music in a respectable and acceptable way. Roemer’s film, however, was on an immensely smaller production scale and therefore reached a

much smaller audience. The groundwork for how to use black artists' music, especially Motown, was set in the early 60s with *Nothing But a Man*, but reached such a small audience due to its low budget and realistic subject matter. Wesley Morris, a Pulitzer Prize winning critic explains that in the late 70s and early 80s, a sort of gentrification of black music occurred (Morris). "White culture" has an obsession with "black culture", and in *The Big Chill*'s case, the obsession comes in the form of Motown music. However, Morris references that this obsession comes from not a fear of black people themselves, but "an anxiety over white obsolescence" (Morris). The characters in *The Big Chill*, *The Blues Brothers*, and *Soul Man* see "black culture" as their own through picking out the things they deem as "cool", which gave the okay for general audiences to do the same. These films were unconsciously creating more problems for black artists, which felt a pushback in 1989 with a film centered around the reappropriation of "culture", Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*.

### Chapter 3 -

#### *Do the Right Thing: Reappropriation*

While *The Big Chill* was widely looked upon as a “good” movie with a soundtrack that many people loved, it was unreflective in the way it went about using black artists’ music both in the diegesis and the non-diegetic soundtrack. Many films around this time used black artists’ music much like *The Big Chill* did, with a focus on white people claiming ownership over black artists’ music. Some of these films include *The Blues Brothers* (as previously stated), *Back to the Future* (1985), where Marty McFly plays Chuck Berry’s 1958 hit “Johnny B. Goode” to a group of amazed white students, and *American Graffiti* (1972), where a group of white high schoolers enjoy their last night of freedom while listening to a plethora of black artists’ music. Many films during this era appropriated black music culture much like *The Big Chill*. However, each of these films varied slightly in their approach. This era of cultural appropriation was met with a resistance of black musical artists who spawned the new counterculture genre of hip hop, in which black youth were able to retaliate against normative white values as well as criminal justice issues according to Casarae Gibson in an article for *Black Camera* (Gibson 190). This is most apparent in Spike Lee’s 1989 film, *Do the Right Thing*. Lee creates a tense battle of culture between a black community in Brooklyn and an Italian pizza shop owner and his family. Lee was able to bring this conversation of racial inequality and culture into the public discourse with the help of specific music in the film. There is no discussion of Lee’s film without the inclusion of Public Enemy’s 1989 hit “Fight the Power”, a hip hop song released by Motown Records and inspired by The Isley Brothers’ 1975 single, “Fight the Power, Pts. 1 and 2” (Adams). In the making of his film, Lee sought out Public Enemy to create a theme for the film centered around racial tensions in Brooklyn (Adams). “Fight the Power” became an anthem for black youth in the

late 80s when it was released and served as an integral backbone to *Do the Right Thing*. The film uses Public Enemy's song as a "social critique of mainstream America rejecting black voices" (Gibson 191).

While the idea of appropriation/reappropriation was essentially born with the inception of culture, the reappropriation of black music and culture specifically was not "mainstream" until Lee stepped onto the scene with *Do the Right Thing*. Reappropriation, although not mainstream, did exist however, as Harry M. Benschoff explains in a *Cinema Journal* article titled "Blaxploitation Horror Films: Generic Reappropriation or Reinscription?" Although rooted specifically in Blaxploitation horror films, Benschoff explains that characters like Blacula "...might seem racist in films made solely by whites (i.e., using African American culture as the signifier of exoticized horror), within these films they usually represent a form of black cultural empowerment over a rational white discourse" (Benschoff 37). This is the idea that Lee utilizes so well in *Do the Right Thing*. Lee takes the black experience and shows it to the audience from the black community's point of view to take back, or reappropriate black culture. Throughout the film, one of the prominent characters, who is later killed by police, is Radio Raheem. Raheem, clad with two, four finger rings that say "love" and "hate", carries around a boombox that constantly blares "Fight the Power". The heart of the film comes from the interactions between the Italians who own the local pizza joint, Sal's, and the members of the black community in which the pizzeria is located. A pivotal scene occurs when Radio Raheem, along with his friend Buggin' Out, enter the restaurant blaring the song, even though earlier in the film, Sal, the owner of the pizzeria, has told Raheem that there is no rap music allowed in his restaurant. Buggin' Out and Raheem demand that Sal put up pictures of black people on his "Wall of Fame", which only features famous Italian Americans. The whole scene is incredibly tense, with every shot on a

dutch angle, then moving to a handheld camera. “Fight the Power” throughout the film goes in and out of the diegesis, however in this scene, the music is completely diegetic. As the tensions rise between Buggin’ Out, Raheem, and Sal, the screaming match soon turns into a battle of racist slurs. This escalates when Sal pulls out a baseball bat and proceeds to kill the music by smashing the boombox. The rising “Fight the Power” is cut off as Sal beats the boombox, and the two are left in silence. This leads to Raheem beating up Sal and minutes later, Raheem’s death at the hands of a police officer. According to Gibson, Sal’s reactionary beatdown of the boombox comes from his own inability to make sense of rap music (Gibson 192). The physical altercation between the two over the music shows the younger generation, who use rap music to express their struggles in the world, and the older, white generation who is trying to maintain the power that people like Raheem are “fighting”; hence the lyrics, “Fight the powers that be” (Gibson 192).



**Fig. 3 – Shot from Sal’s point of view, Radio Raheem refuses to turn down his music as Buggin’ Out confronts Sal in his pizzeria**

The boombox smashing scene is the most pivotal from a music standpoint. Up to this point, black artists' music has evolved from Motown, where people like Martha Reeves sang to bring unity, to rap, where groups like Public Enemy rap to bring awareness to the racism happening around not just them, but all black people in America. Although both artists are represented by Motown records and attempt to bring equality, the major difference in rap like "Fight the Power" and classic Motown is that late 80s rap is attempting to take back black artists music. By the time of *Do the Right Thing*'s release, classic Motown had already been claimed by "white culture" as seen in films like *The Big Chill* and *The Blues Brothers*. "Fight the Power" was made to accompany *Do the Right Thing* in taking back ownership of black artists' music. Throughout the film, Radio Raheem is carrying around his boombox, unapologetically blasting his music, not giving people the chance to tell him otherwise. Raheem is actively reappropriating black music as he walks around and refuses to concede to anybody. This ultimately leads to Sal attempting to silence the noise and the climax of the film. Essentially all rappers in the 1980s were black, which made Raheem blasting people like Public Enemy even more attention-grabbing to people like Sal, who were not used to that type of music.

An instrumental spark of conflict among the characters in the film is Sal's wall of Italian Americans. Buggin' Out is in constant protest of the pictures, claiming that there should be black people on the wall since it is a black community and all of the customers are black. Sal's argument is similar, as he states that he owns the space, so he can do with it what he pleases. The two are at odds of who actually owns the space. Physically, Sal owns the pizzeria, but culturally, the black community are really the only patrons and therefore keep Sal in the space. In the midst of their altercation, they both bring up understandable sides of the argument. The question of



who is ultimately right is never answered, as the end of the film sees Sal's burned to the ground, taking away Sal and Mookie's income as well as a staple restaurant in the neighborhood, therefore no one wins. This harkens back to the statement of the whole film to do the right thing. But what is the right thing? Douglas Kellner explains in his essay, *Aesthetics, Ethics, and Politics in the Films of Spike Lee*, that Lee never gives a direct answer to what "the right thing" is (Kellner 76). The film is from a black perspective and gives the idea that people should fight the oppressive and racist power, though when the people of the community do fight the power, they end up having to use violence, which results in neither Sal nor Mookie's side of the fight winning (Kellner 76). Lee's political stance is vague, as he neither tells the audience how to fight the power, who the power is they are supposed to be fighting, or what the right thing to do really is (Kellner 89). Lee does however focus heavily on the idea of cultural identity and the reappropriation of black artists' music through "Fight the Power". While the song itself was created specifically for the film, it's reach is more widespread than *Do the Right Thing* itself. "Fight the Power" has been used as a go-to phrase during protests of inequality because the phrase reminds people of not only the lyrics to the song, but also the imagery of *Do the Right Thing*; specifically, when Raheem is murdered unnecessarily by police. People are reminded of the cultural identity politics expressed in Lee's film and are forced to constantly question their methods of protest, as well as what ask themselves, what is the right thing to do? Compared to past films of problematic cultural appropriation like *The Big Chill*, the combination of hip hop and film in *Do the Right Thing* analyzes cultural appropriation and is an exercise in reappropriation.

## Chapter 4 –

### ***Bamboozled: The Pitfalls of Reappropriation***

Lee's *Do the Right Thing* brought the idea of reappropriation into the world of mainstream film, though it did not come without problems. In Lee's 2000 film, *Bamboozled*, only 11 years after *Do the Right Thing*, Lee explores the pitfalls the difficult task of navigating cultural reappropriation in the mainstream media. In an article by Ray Black, published in the *Journal of Black Studies and Research*, Black explains that although *Bamboozled* is somewhat erratic in its execution, Lee's film is "a call to recognize the misuse and abuse of the black image informing the mainstream mind..." (Black 20). *Bamboozled* is the story of a Harvard educated, African American television writer, Pierre Delacroix, whose shows about black families constantly get shot down by his white boss because they paint black people in too positive a light. Delacroix, in turn, creates a modern-day minstrel show in protest, but to his dismay, the show becomes a hit within the popular culture for all of the wrong reasons. The film also features a rap group that goes by the name The Mau Maus, who have the style of Public Enemy with a little more grit. This group auditions for Delacroix's show, but is turned away for "being too black". Their music for Delacroix, speaks too much to the black experience, which is what rap at the time was known for. The film is satire, and much of the time, as Black points out, "the use of satire to deliver this message of condemnation, cuts the intended target, as well as the one wielding it" (Black 20). Black is speaking about Delacroix, as he satirically uses minstrelsy as a way to get fired but ends up becoming a satire of himself when the show becomes popular and he embraces blackface. The same could be argued with The Mau Maus as well.



**Fig. 4 – Savion Glover in blackface as Mantan**

The Mau Maus audition for Delacroix’s show with a powerful performance about the way black people are treated in the United States, with much of the same feeling that “Fight the Power” had. As stated, Delacroix refuses to give them the part because they are too black, which leads the group to become angry with the show and its use of blackface. The Mau Maus proceed to capture the star of the show, Manray, and kill him on a live webcast. Lee turns The Mau Maus into satire themselves, criticizing the 90s era of gangsta rap. Gangsta rap was a genre of hip hop that came about in the 90s and was “a reflection and product of the often violent lifestyle American inner cities afflicted with poverty and the dangers of drug use...” (Tate). The Mau Maus and Delacroix share a parallel journey showing the pitfalls of reappropriation, with Delacroix’s journey focusing on television and the use of blackface, and The Mau Maus appearing to challenge Delacroix’s “cultural appropriation” while actually revealing that their

version of blackness has no depth (Black 20). This meaning that The Mau Maus attempt to show their own version of reappropriation by taking back their blackness through Manray and killing him, they actually fit into the stereotypes that people at the time had regarding gangsta rap, and more broadly, black Americans.



**Fig. 5 – The Mau Maus audition for Delacroix’s show, *Mantan: The New Millennium***

*Minstrel Show*



**Fig. 6 – Delacroix is confused and disgusted by The Mau Maus’ audition**

To compliment the diegetic music in the film, Lee also compiles a nondiegetic soundtrack of incredible black performers including Stevie Wonder, Erykah Badu, Prince, The Roots, and Terrance Blanchard. The most notable of these tracks is Stevie Wonder’s “Misrepresented People”, a ballad detailing the history of how black people have been misrepresented. Having a mix of original Motown artists on the soundtrack combined with new and old hip hop artists raises Lee’s attention to reappropriation by acknowledging the issues that have come before it. For example, looking back to *Nothing But a Man* and its neorealist music, one of Stevie Wonder’s songs, “Fingertips”, was used in the film. While at the time, he was Little Stevie Wonder, the difference in context between the two films is what is important. In *Do the Right Thing*, Lee’s focus is taking back black music and identity, while in *Bamboozled*, Lee blends together a mix of rap, which evokes the reappropriation theme, and Motown artists, who

have been culturally appropriated throughout the 70s, 80s, and 90s. Lee is actively bringing attention to racial issues through his use of music to accompany *Bamboozled*, while in *Nothing But a Man*, the music exists as a tool to place the characters in a specific time and place. Both of these ways to go about including black artists' music in a film come from a specific era due to the climate of racial tensions, yet both still endure. A film that uses black artists' music is most likely either problematically appropriating the music, as seen in *The Big Chill*, using the music to give further context for the characters' culture, like in *Nothing But a Man*, or attempting to reappropriate both culture and music, as seen in both *Do the Right Thing* and *Bamboozled*.

## Chapter 5 -

### ***Killer of Sheep and Waves: Enduring Symphonies of Blackness***

Though it seems that the reappropriation of black artists' music in film has only been a fairly recent effort with Spike Lee bringing it into the mainstream with films like *Do the Right Thing*, this approach to black music has always been around. As seen in *Nothing But a Man*, the music used is diegetic, serving the idea of neorealist music, yet it is still taking black music and using it to tell black stories. Much like *Nothing But a Man*, Charles Burnett's 1978 film, *Killer of Sheep* is a somewhat neorealist film that centers on the life of a black slaughterhouse worker and the episodic moments in his life that come with being a poor, black man in America. Burnett's film came out over ten years after *Nothing But a Man*, but was actually created as a student film in 1972 and 73 (Naremore 21). Burnett's film is seen as being heavily influenced by Italian Neorealism, as Burnett is quoted as saying, "you can't find any other form as poetic as neorealism" (Naremore 22). Burnett and Roemer both created documentary-like films about the black experience using black music, though Burnett uses the music diegetically and non diegetically to further Roemer's ideas on reappropriation.

In Burnett's film, the audience follows the protagonist, Stan, through various vignettes of his life as a father of two kids, a husband, and a slaughterhouse worker. The music throughout the film serves much of the same purpose as it did in *Nothing But a Man*, with the diegetic music situating the characters in a specific time and place, but it also serves as a tool of reappropriation. The film opens with a lullaby being sung by two women and a father disciplining his son. The mother of the child slaps him as Paul Robeson's version of the same lullaby non-diegetically plays over the opening credits. In another scene, Stan and his wife slow dance to Dinah Washington's "This Bitter Earth", and as the song progresses, Stan refuses to become intimate

with her, leaving the frame as the song ends. This scene in particular is one uninterrupted shot, giving the audience a true slice of life for black Americans in the early 70s. This is what much of the film contains: long, uninterrupted shots of black Americans in their daily lives, whether that includes Stan working in the slaughterhouse to make ends meet, Stan's daughter and wife lounging in the house, or Stan hanging out with his friends. Each of these sequences are also almost completely independent of one another, with each scene not relating to the last.

Throughout the film, the adults are portrayed as tired and frustrated because of their inability to have options and control their own life, while the children represent innocence, happily running around and singing to music (Maillard). This is apparent in another scene in which Stan's daughter sings along to "Reasons" by Earth, Wind & Fire as her mother applies makeup in the other room. The two are intercut together, with the daughter's mumbled lyrics attempting to follow along with the song. The difference between this film and *Nothing But a Man* becomes clear in this scene. The focus in this scene is on the music being played. It does not just simply exist in their world, but rather influences both the characters in the scene and the story of the film overall. Burnett includes 70s artists like Earth, Wind & Fire, popular 50s artists like Dinah Washington, and even 30s and 40s artists like Paul Robeson. This wide-ranging soundtrack further cements *Killer of Sheep* as an enduring black experience that does not represent just one era of black artistry.





**Fig. 7 – Stan’s daughter sings Earth, Wind, and Fire’s “Reasons” while her mother applies makeup in the other room, giving a true slice of life for a low income, black family in the 70s**

The idea of reappropriating black experiences and artistry on film has reached a new height in popularity today. This idea is represented in Trey Edwards Shults’ 2017 film, *Waves*. *Waves* follows the story of an upper middle-class black family in the present day as they struggle to cope with their son’s mistakes. The film, much like *Nothing But a Man*, is directed by a white male. Shults explains in an interview that the film is a vessel for the other black collaborators, with a main partner being Kelvin Harrison Jr., who plays one of the main characters, Tyler (B). In an interview with The American Society of Cinematographers, Shultz explains,

“I started to tell him (Kelvin) about this movie, the broad strokes. I wanted to see if we could figure this out together, and we got closer for a year. We started doing what we called “mini-therapy

sessions”, long phone calls and text messages about our past -- finding, shockingly, a lot of commonalities in our experiences: dynamics with our parents, both of us grew up in the South, upper middle class, but then of course differences. For me it was about understanding a lot of Kelvin’s past and his head space: growing up in a black family, being a young black man, the generational baggage that came up in his family, the dynamics of his relationships. This went on the whole time I was writing the first draft. I sent it to Kely, and he still wanted to play Tyler, and we continued our ongoing collaboration. We would analyze the script, we would talk through everything. He would tell me: ‘This doesn’t feel authentic, this doesn’t feel right’, and give specific language, or inspirations for a scene. And I would hone and refine, just trying to hear Kelvin. And that pure collaboration is the only reason it works, if it does. Kelvin and I really believe in this movie” (B).

The key to *Waves* is collaboration and understanding on both sides of the equation. While Roemer drew from what they saw black people experiencing, Shultz takes the next step and creates a story that not only draws from his own experiences, but also black Americans as well. Shults, like Roemer, succeeds in not claiming ownership of the experiences of the characters or the soundtrack of the film.

*Waves* not only successfully tells a story about real black Americans, but also uses black artists' music to enhance the story being told on the screen. The film's soundtrack features many different genres and musical artists including Kanye West, Dinah Washington, Frank Ocean, and H.E.R. The film leans into the idea of using music as a means to help tell the story, with the story representing the dichotomies of life through Tyler and his sister (Shults). The film is broken into halves, with the first half focusing on Tyler and his struggle with pressure to be great. Tyler's half of the film features grittier hip hop like Kanye West's "I Am a God". Specifically, West's song, among others, plays at the climax of Tyler's story when he finally gives in to the pressure around him and goes to a party upset, drunk, and high. Tyler pushes his dominant father out the way and proceeds to confront his girlfriend about flirting with another man. Tyler's girlfriend slaps him, and, in a rage, he slaps her back, knocking her to the floor and accidentally killing her and their unborn child. After Tyler is arrested, the film switches perspective to Tyler's sister, Emily. The second half of the film focuses on Emily attempting to find out how she can forgive herself for what happened and figure out how to love again. On the A24 website, Shults created an annotated playlist of the soundtrack of the film. Not only does the playlist go into detail about why Shults chose each song, but the existence of the playlist in general shows the care that Shults put into curating the music. More so than simply picking out songs, the act of curating a soundtrack is an art form in itself. Each song complements the emotions and feelings of the characters, while also having personal meanings to them. Shults explains in his annotated playlist that the songs in the second half of the film take a more soulful and spiritual approach, using the likes of Frank Ocean and SZA (Shults). Shultz curates music that helps tell the story of the characters, rather than take ownership over the music like the characters in *The Big Chill*. In *Waves*, the characters not only listen to black artists' music, but also to people like Amy

Winehouse and Tame Impala. While the film is about the black experience, specifically of an upper middle-class family, at its core is a message of raw human emotion that was created with multiple collaborators over multiple races.



**Fig. 8 – Tyler spirals out of control as “Backseat Freestyle” by Kendrick Lamar plays in the background**

*Waves* and *Killer of Sheep* came out 39 years apart, yet both films take the same approach to their soundtracks, even featuring Dinah Washington on both. Each filmmaker acts as a curator of music for their film, choosing songs that will both help plant their characters in a specific time and place, and also enhance the story of the characters on screen. Burnett, Shultz, and even Roemer do not claim ownership over the music they choose, while Spike Lee asked specific impactful Motown and Hip-Hop artists to make songs specifically for *Bamboozled* and *Do the*

*Right Thing*. Kasdan could also be considered a curator of black artists' music, yet the execution in *The Big Chill* did not highlight the black experience and instead put its focus on the white ownership of the songs.

## Conclusion

Throughout the history of the American cinema, African Americans have always had to fight for equal representation<sup>1</sup>. At the inception of cinema and the 40 to 50 years after, black filmmakers did not have the means and were not given the opportunity to have their stories told. When black stories began to be told during the civil rights movement, the films that were made usually had extremely low budgets and therefore were not seen by many people due to poor access to mainstream distribution channels. This was the case of Roemer's *Nothing But a Man*. *Nothing But a Man* is not only a film that deals with racism and problems black Americans faced in the 60s, but also an exercise in ethically unobjectionable cultural appropriation. The film, directed by a white man, is able to bring to life the character of Duff, while also bringing together a collection of Motown hits that situate the characters in not only a time and place, but also gives the characters a cultural identity. The Motown music in the film is their sound; it plays diegetically in the restaurants, dance halls, and neighborhoods throughout the film. Roemer treats the film as a collaboration project and tells Duff's story while playing by the rules of real life like a true neorealist film. Due to the budget restrictions that black people faced at the time, films like *Nothing But a Man* were relatively unsuccessful in the box office. Though these films were unsuccessful financially, Hollywood became aware of the popularity of the accompanying soundtracks that were comprised of black artists' music and in the case of *Nothing But a Man*, it was Motown music.

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<sup>1</sup> Guerrero, Ed. *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. Temple University Press, 1993. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvrdf2mb](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvrdf2mb). Accessed 12 July 2021.

Over the next two decades, Hollywood began to claim ownership over black artists' music, especially Motown. A possibility for this theft could lie in Wesley Morris' ideas over a white "anxiety over white obsolescence" (Morris). This theft is apparent in films like *The Blues Brothers*, *Back to the Future*, and *The Big Chill*. The film was a box office success but featured a cast of all white characters nostalgically choosing to play music from their college years, which included various Motown hits. The white filmmaker, Lawrence Kasdan, tells an emotional story about a group of friends, but fails to treat the Motown hits featured with due respect. The characters feel as though they have ownership over the songs, rather than curating them and realizing their significance. They see the songs for what they are designed to be: surface level, melodic, and danceable songs about love. While one could argue that the characters are fulfilling the songs' goals and just simply enjoying them, this ignorant acceptance that the 60s were a time of love and equality for everyone feeds into America's problem of an unconscious racism. This problematic cultural appropriation continued with films like *American Graffiti* and *Soul Man* until black filmmakers like Spike Lee created films like *Do the Right Thing* and *Bamboozled* to fight for the reappropriation of black culture.

*Do the Right Thing* premiered in 1989 and was wildly controversial for not only its characters engaging in a culture war, but also because of the main theme of the film, Public Enemy's "Fight the Power". The film itself does not tell the audience how to solve racism, or even the best way to go about addressing it, however it does force people to think and have a conversation (Kellner 76). The film's theme, "Fight the Power", utilizes rap to send a message of reappropriation, as white rappers at the time were essentially nonexistent. The striking visuals of Lee's film paired with Public Enemy's authentic sound creates a statement of taking back black culture. *Do the Right Thing* and "Fight the Power" are still used to this day to remind the world

how important cultural identity is and the importance of reappropriating culturally appropriated art. In a spiritual follow up to these ideas, Lee created *Bamboozled* in 2003, which addressed the issue of reappropriation itself. In the film, Lee explores the problems that could arise if reappropriation is used incorrectly or taken too far. Delacroix attempts to take back the idea of minstrel shows and satirize them by having black people put on said shows. However, the show becomes a success with everyone who is not black, becoming popular for all of the wrong reasons. This is Lee's thought experiment exploring the inevitable loop of appropriation/reappropriation. This is shown not only through the minstrel show itself, but The Mau Maus as well. In trying to take back black culture using gansta rap, they also become the very stereotype they were aiming to eradicate by killing Manray. The attempt at reappropriation by The Mau Maus and Delacroix ultimately ends by fueling the fire of unconscious racism, as exhibited on a much lesser level in *The Big Chill*. The soundtrack of *Bamboozled* features a perfect mix of culturally appropriated Motown artists like Stevie Wonder, as well as rappers and groups like The Mau Maus to warn that history can repeat itself. In *Do the Right Thing*, Lee aims to reappropriate black culture through music, while in *Bamboozled*, Lee's goal is to take back the idea of taking back, or to take back reappropriation.

Many films today, like *Waves* and others by Spike Lee, have moved toward a more reflective and analytical treatment of race and culture. While most of these films created today still culturally appropriate, as all art does, they do so in a manner that is ethically unobjectionable and respectful to the culture of the original artist (Young 1). This is exemplified in *Waves*, a story about the modern, middle class black experience that is directed by a white man. Much like Roemer with *Nothing But a Man*, *Waves* was created on a foundation of respect and mutual collaboration to accurately tell the story of the black characters. Shults is able to tell



the family's story by seeing them as human beings and acknowledging their blackness, while not making their blackness their only characteristic. Shults also uses a mix of black artists' music to enhance the story and use the feelings, emotions, and histories of each song to help develop the characters. While this sort of ethically sound cultural appropriation is prevalent in American cinema today, the fact is that this type of filmmaking has existed since the rise in films about the black experience. Proof of this comes in not only *Nothing But a Man*, but also in Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*. While *Killer of Sheep* is a look at the life of black Americans in the 70s and created by a black man, it still uses black artists' music in a way that differs from films like Roemer's. Burnett's film takes influence from Italian Neorealism like Roemer, but uses the diegetic music more to his advantage. The music is more clearly Stan's music, while Duff almost never acknowledges the music playing in *Nothing But a Man*. Stan's daughter especially shows ownership of the music as she unconsciously sings it aloud. Burnett exhibits the importance of owning your own culture's identity and the art that goes along with it by having his characters acknowledge the music and experience it, rather than using it purely for leisure and pleasure like in *The Big Chill*. *Killer of Sheep* could almost be considered a precursor to films like *Do the Right Thing* and *Bamboozled*, acting as a preemptive measure against cultural appropriation through embracing cultural identity.

Cultural reappropriation as a practice is now fundamental in stories about the black experience. From years of problematic cultural appropriation, audiences have been trained to accept the unconscious racism seen on the screen. With filmmakers like Spike Lee, Trey Edward Shults, and even Charles Burnett, audiences are being retrained to understand black culture and music from a different point of view. This is done through telling stories from the perspective of the black experience and subsequently through collaboration with black people. As a white male,

the goal of this thesis was to not only identify the problematic nature of the cultural appropriation of black artists' music in Hollywood, but also to explore the various ways in which ethical cultural appropriation and reappropriation have been and continue to be used to open doors to new cultural possibilities.

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Expected august 2021

### Honors and Awards

2017	Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications Dean's List (Fall semester)
2018	Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications Dean's List (Fall semester)
2019	Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications Dean's List (Spring semester)
2017 - 18	Barraclough Scholarship
2017 - 21	Leslie and Anna Pyle Memorial Scholarship

### Research

2019	Independent Study Research Paper on Cinephilia and Pastiche
2020	Honors Scholar Paper on the portrayal of films versus other media in films
2021	Honors Scholar Paper examining the role of women and gender in African films

Interested in

- Film History
- Film Theory
- Cinephilia
- Relationship between other forms of media and film
- Relationship between new age cinephilia and traditional cinephilia

### Experience

- Director of two student films - *The First World Problem* and *HEAL: A Documentary* - (2018)
- Producer of two student films - *him.* and *Range* - (2019)
- Producer on one feature length student film - *The Fallen* (2019)
- Assistant Director of *Pulling Daisies* (2021) – student film
- Part of the story development team on *Take a Little Time* (2021) – a student film