



Boyz in the Hood

Study Guide

Boyz N the Hood

Introduction

'Boyz in the Hood' has been described as a powerful drama about growing up in black Urban America. Written and directed by John Singleton who grew up in the "Hood" (short for neighbourhood), in South Central Los Angeles. The film tells the story of three friends: Tre, Doughboy and Ricky.

At the beginning of the film we see Tre living with his mother. At school he gets involved in classroom conflicts with other pupils, breaking a 'contract' that he had with his mother to behave. The result of this is that his mother feels it is time for Tre's father (Furious Styles) to resume his responsibility for Tre and teach him values that – Singleton is clearly saying in the film – only a father can.

Set against this example of a father taking responsibility for his son, are Tre's two friends, Ricky and Doughboy. They live with their mother in the same neighbourhood. The absence of their father is conspicuous throughout the movie. Doughboy is seen going 'off the rails' whilst still a young boy. By the time he is seventeen he has already served a jail sentence and his future seems to be set in a pattern of selling drugs and gang violence. Ricky becomes a father while still at school. The cycle of children deserted by fathers unable to cope psychologically or economically with a family seems likely to repeat itself. The 'hope' for Ricky is that he sees a football scholarship leading to a college place as his way out of the violence and poverty of the area.

John Singleton has said he is pleased that his film reaches a wider audience than the Black community as it "deals with ordinary human conditions. Everyone sees a part of themselves in the film." He believes that story and character are the most important aspects of filmmaking: "Never be afraid of your material. The audience should not think they are watching a movie," he says.

VIDEO CLIPS: A, B, C

TASK 1

List as many different types of film as you can think of and give an example for each one (e.g. science fiction: "Terminator")

TASK 2

For each of the films that you have listed write down what you think the filmmakers have done to make their film interesting and entertaining (e.g. special effects; mystery to solve).

TASK 3

- a) What has the director done to make "Boyz in the Hood" interesting and entertaining? Compare this list to that made in Task 2.
- b) What more is there to the film than simply its entertainment value?
- c) The press have used the word 'Edu-tainment' to describe "Boyz in the Hood". What do you think that this means?
- d) What age and type of audience do you think the film is aimed at?

When "Boyz in the Hood" was released by Columbia Pictures, some of the press likened it to a range of other films released around the same time that had Black directors, actors and writers. Directors like Mario Van Peebles ("New Jack City") objected to the tag, "New Black Cinema". He says, "It's got so that if anyone Black comes along they say, 'He got a camera with him? Hire that boy. You never know, maybe this shit is genetic.'"

TASK 4

Study the list on page 3 and try to find common themes. You may find the following groupings useful:

VIOLENCE
RELATIONSHIPS
DRUGS
FAMILY LIFE
RESPECT
RESPONSIBILITY
EDUCATION

TASK 5

Discussion suggestions:

- a) Do the films all deal with the same themes?
- b) Can the films be 'lumped' together?
- c) Why might the press have lumped them together?
- d) If you had to choose two main themes, what would you choose for "Boyz in the Hood"?

TASK 6

Steve Nicolaidis, the producer of the film, says: “The strength of the Black community is what makes this film strong. The script is sincere – more important – timely. This story is about our society today, and it’s important for everyone to take a look at what our society is doing to itself.”

- a) Are these problems new to society?
- b) Why do you think film makers and the public are particularly interested in these issues now?

1991 FILMS BY BLACK DIRECTORS

FILM	DIRECTOR	STUDIO	DESCRIPTION
New Jack City	Mano Van Peebles	Warner Bros.	Drug lord and his gang take over a New York City neighbourhood
The Five Heartbeats	Robert Townsend	20 th Century Fox	Charts the lives and lovers of five men in a 1960s musical group
A Rage In Harlem	Bill Duke	Miramax	God-fearing undertaker gets caught up with sexy con-woman and her gang
Straight Out of Brooklyn	Matty Rich	Samuel Goldwyn Co.	Teen living in New York housing project gets caught up in deadly crime in an effort to better his family's life
Livin' Large	Michel Schultz	Samuel Goldwyn Co.	Ghetto teen tells his soul to get ahead in the course of pursuing his dream to become a TV newscaster
Jungle Fever	Spike Lee	Universal Pictures	Interracial couple tries to keep relationship intact despite attacks from friends, family and neighbours
Talkin' Dirty After Dark	Topper Carew	New Line	Looks at life inside a Watts comedy club
Hangin' With the Homeboys	Joseph Vasquez	New Line	The all-night adventures of a quartet of Hispanic and Black friends
Boyz N The Hood	John Singleton	Columbia Pictures	Teen deals with parents, girls, friends, and the violence of the streets as he grows up in South-Central LA
True Identity	Charles Lane	Disney-Touchstone	Aspiring young actor goes under-cover to prove that a missing Mafia kingpin is actually still alive
House Party 2	George Jackson and Doug McHenry	New Line	Sequel to hit comedy starring popular duo Kid 'n Play
Juice	Ernest Dickerson	Island-World Moritz-Heyman	Talented Harlem teen is torn between his ambitions as a DJ and his loyalty to a violence-prone friend
Go Natalie	Kevin Hooks	Warner Bros.	With help from a street-smart mail clerk, an ambitious investment banker discovers his black roots on way to getting the girl
Daughters of the Dust	Julie Dash	American Playhouse	Turn-of-the-century story about a family of women who emigrate to the northern United States
Street Wars	Jamaa Fanaka	Independent	Graduate from elite military academy forms ghetto air force to fight inner-city crack houses
Chameleon Street	Wendell Harris Jr	Independent	Detroit man impersonates doctors, journalists and lawyers before being caught
Up Against the Wall	Ron O'Neal	African-American Images	Independent film directed by star of popular 1972 movie 'Superfly'
Perfume	Roland Jefferson	Independent	Relationships between five women friends who open a cosmetics company
The Three Muskateles	Romell Foster-Owens	Independent	Family-oriented spoof on 'The Three Musketeers'

BACKGROUND

'One out of every 21 Black American males will be murdered'. Most will die at the hands of another Black male.'

From 'Boyz N the Hood'

John Singleton grew up in South Central Los Angeles, first with his mother and then, like Tre in "Boyz" he moved in with his father. The film, shot entirely on location in South Central L.A. (the "hood"), tries to be realistic in its portrayal of the area and the people. Singleton insisted on directing the film and he also insisted that the film company allow him to use a 90% Black crew.

Bill Duke (Director of "A Rage in Harlem") says of being a Black American:

"My experience is a particular one, my struggles have been particular. My people have literally not been able to sit down and eat lunch at the same counter as you, or use the same water fountain. My mother and father told me stories from the South, where they saw people lynched, hanging from trees... those are different experiences from Whites and I don't want to ignore that."

TASK 7

- a) Discuss Bill Duke's statement above.
- c) What is it that John Singleton is suggesting is missing from so many of the young people in the neighbourhood, particularly the young men?

THE FILM

"Boyz N The Hood" concentrates less on the conditions imposed on Black people living in a largely white society than on the lack of respect and the lack of responsibility that so many people in the film display. Lack of respect and responsibility, as we have already seen, are two of the main ideas in the film.

TASK 8

- a) In groups, write down as many examples as you can remember from where the film characters show a lack of respect.
- b) Do the same where people show a lack of responsibility.

RESPECT

Throughout the film, as shown by these extracts, people show no respect for one another. The dead are just left to rot. 'Brother' fights 'brother'. Women are called whores. They call their own friends 'niggers'. The scenes with the Black policemen are telling. We, the audience, know

that Furious Styles is an honest man trying to raise his son to lead a better life than that of so many of the boys in the neighbourhood. Yet the Black policeman has no respect for him either. Why is this? It's because, like so many white people, he doesn't see Furious as an individual. He sees him as an individual. He sees him as part of a faceless mass of Black people, all of them in his mind are pimps, drug-pushers or gang members.

TASK 9

The policemen might be described as 'Black on the outside, White on the inside'. Discuss.

From the moment that Tre moves in with his father we see examples of Furious trying to teach his son respect. The first thing he has to do is clear all the leaves from the garden . It is a small incident but can you think of ways in which this might teach Tre respect?

As a young boy Tre talks about girls in the crude way that he has picked up from other boys on the street. He thinks that all there is to sex is "sticking your thing in".

Years later at the party given by Ricky and Doughboy's mother all the other boys push to the front for food. It is Tre who tells them to let the girls go first. Why do you think none of the others thought to do this? Why should the girls go first?

TASK 10

- a) Like other boys, Tre does not want to be thought of as a virgin. Not even by his father. Is it surprising that Tre lies to his father about his sexual experience?
- b) List as many ways as you can think of in which Tre is different from the other boys in the "Hood".

RESPONSIBILITY

There is a phrase that Doughboy utters towards the end of the film after his brother Ricky has been shot dead by a rival gang member. Tre and Doughboy bring Ricky's body back to the house, Ricky's mother shouts at Doughboy, "What did you do?" Doughboy replies, "I didn't do nothing."

TASK 11

Discuss the confrontation when Doughboy taunts the gang outside his home and decide if it is true that Doughboy "didn't do nothing", that he was in no way responsible for his brother's death.

"I didn't do nothing," is an echo that one hears throughout the film. You hear it in the absence of fathers, in Doughboy selling drugs that further corrupt his own neighbourhood, in Ricky fathering a child he can't even support himself, in dropping out of school and condemning

themselves to a life of petty crime (and perhaps not so petty) on the streets. Few people in the 'Hood' take responsibility for their actions and their lives. Certainly Doughboy doesn't see that he is in anyway responsible for his brother's death.

Tre's father, Furious, is one of the few exceptions in this film. He takes responsibility for his son and from the film it looks as though he is the only father in the 'Hood' who does. "The film has a lot of messages in it... but my main message is that African American men have to take more responsibility for raising their children, especially their boys. Fathers have to teach their boys to be men. The audience will be able to see the directions that the characters take when there is an absence or a presence of fathers in their lives." (John Singleton: Columbia Pictures Production Information).

TASK 12

- a) Suggest some possible reasons why the men should feel unable to stay with their families and support them.

VIDEO CLIP: H

- b) Discuss the idea that Black males have been deprived of the means to support their families by white society, that their will and pride have been undermined and as a result they have given up trying.

There are various ways in the film that John Singleton shows Furious Styles guiding and helping his son. He encourages him with his schooling. We see Tre working at home at his own desk that his father has provided. This is in clear contrast to Ricky who has to study with the television on, in an over-crowded home, being sent on errands in the middle of his work. Tre's father gives him talks on sex education. He steers him away from the gangs. He holds out the possibility of a better future.

VIDEO CLIP: I

John Singleton believes that the family must hold together if the community is not to disintegrate. For this to happen fathers must take responsibility for their sons, brother for brother and individuals must take responsibility for their own actions.

TASK 13

- a) Can you think of characters in the film who take responsibility for themselves or others apart from Furious Styles?
- b) What is it that they do that sets them apart from the crowd?

"BOYZ": A CAUTIONARY TALE

'Black folks we've got to stick together otherwise this genocide is going to take its course.'
John Singleton

Genocide: *“The international and systematic destruction of a national, radical, ethical or religious group.”*

New Elizabethan Religious Dictionary

TASK 14

- a) What does he mean by this “genocide is going to take its course”?
- b) Is the film’s message really that pessimistic?
- c) List at least three ways in the film in which John Singleton is suggesting that the cycle of violence, ignorance and poverty might be broken.

Although Singleton thinks that the education system is biased against Black children in America, he still sees it as a way of breaking out of the ghetto.

TASK 15

Consider (in groups) the following suggestions about how education might help Black people in areas like the 'Hood'. List them in what you think is their order of importance. Some of these suggestions may promote further debate.

- 1 They can get jobs and be able to afford to support their families
- 2 They can go to college and leave the neighbourhood
- 3 They can learn responsibility
- 4 They learn to respect themselves and others
- 5 They learn about sex
- 6 They find an aim and direction in life
- 7 They learn that confrontation is often a bad way of dealing with a situation
- 8 They learn about drugs
- 9 They are shown the murder statistics among young Black males
- 10 They learn that revenge leads to revenge and the killings continue

There is an alternative education in the film, an alternative curriculum. It is not the ‘three R’s’ of reading, writing and arithmetic. It is the three Rs that recur in this study document and which Furious Styles teaches his son: Respect, Responsibility and Relationships.

John Singleton said that he was pleased that the film reached a wider audience than the Black community. “It deals with ordinary human conditions. Everyone sees a part of themselves in this film.” Most of us may not see gang violence, poverty, racism, family and community breakdown on this scale, but there are elements of this in our schools, in our homes and in our communities.

TASK 16

- a) In groups see if you can think of examples where the problems that the film looks at present in our own communities in the United Kingdom.

c) Can you give reasons why these problems occur?

TASK 17

John Singleton is right in saying that “everyone sees themselves in this film”. Discuss.