

Bullet Boy

FILM SYNOPSIS

Nineteen-year-old Ricky (Ashley Walters) is fresh out of a juvenile detention centre and determined to make a break with his old life. Ricky wants to revive his relationship with his girlfriend (Sharea Mounira Samuels), convince his mother (Clare Perkins) and the local preacher, Leo (Curtis Walker) that he's put his violent past behind him, and help his admiring twelve-year-old brother Curtis (Luke Fraser) to avoid his mistakes. But an old friend, Wisdom (Leon Black) gives Ricky a gun. Wisdom blunders into a feud with Godfrey (Clark Lawson) which swiftly escalates into savage violence and Ricky finds himself wrenched back into the destructive subculture he has learned to despise. Will he now drag his young brother into a life he'd planned to escape?

BEFORE VIEWING RESEARCH

- Make a note of which video/DVD covers on display in your local video/DVD rental shop feature guns. Make a note of which genre you believe these films belong to. You could carry out a similar piece of research in a store which sells computer games.
- Keep a diary of a week's TV viewing. How many of the programmes which you watched featured guns? In how many programmes was the possession of a gun important to the plot?
- Find out how many of your friends/relations/fellow students had toy guns when they were young.
- With a fellow student share and discuss your findings. What conclusions can you reach concerning the significance/importance of guns in contemporary society?

FILMING

Bullet Boy was filmed with lightweight, flexible cameras which could be used for filming in natural light and their mobility contributes to the sense of 'in your face' immediacy that the film generates. Director of Photography Marcel Zyskind comments, *'It was my first time working with Saul (Dibb, the director), and it's been cool because we communicate very well and he gives me a lot of freedom, too much sometimes! It's great not to be locked down by marks on the floor, tracks and dollies. Everything is handheld and Saul lets us move around freely, even doing 360° shots if possible.'*

Director Saul Dibb and Zyskind shot Bullet Boy on the relatively cheap Super 16mm film which is normally used for shooting TV dramas. But in order to avoid making Bullet Boy look like just another made for TV film they 'masked' part of the negative; the cropped image thus produced gave the final film an impressive, vibrant widescreen image (2.35:1), an unusual feature for an independent British feature which Dibb describes as *'...a big cinematic look on a limited budget.'*

LOCATION

Both writer and director Saul Dibb and Zyskind were keen to avoid offering the audience a stereotypical view of working-class city life. The events of *Bullet Boy* takes place in the Borough of Hackney, which is often seen as a particularly 'disadvantaged' part of London. It would be easy to present this area of North East London as a grim 'urban jungle', especially since this part of London is sometimes referred to as 'Murder Mile', because of the high incidence of fatal attacks (often gun-related) which occur there.

Many of the locations are in a small area of only a few square miles but *Bullet Boy* breaks out of the claustrophobic world of dingy clubs and tenement flats by frequently intercutting shots of green fields and empty football pitches – why is nobody playing football on these pitches? Marcel Zyskind comments that, *'We also used fantastic open spaces. You have these big looming pylons and it's quite a contrast between the high rises and the streets and the big open fields. By the marshes and by the river it's quite picturesque, I think it will stand out like wow, is this really London?'*

TASK

- Note down which sequences in *Bullet Boy* subvert the idea of the stereotypical 'urban jungle' film.

DISTRIBUTION AND MARKETING

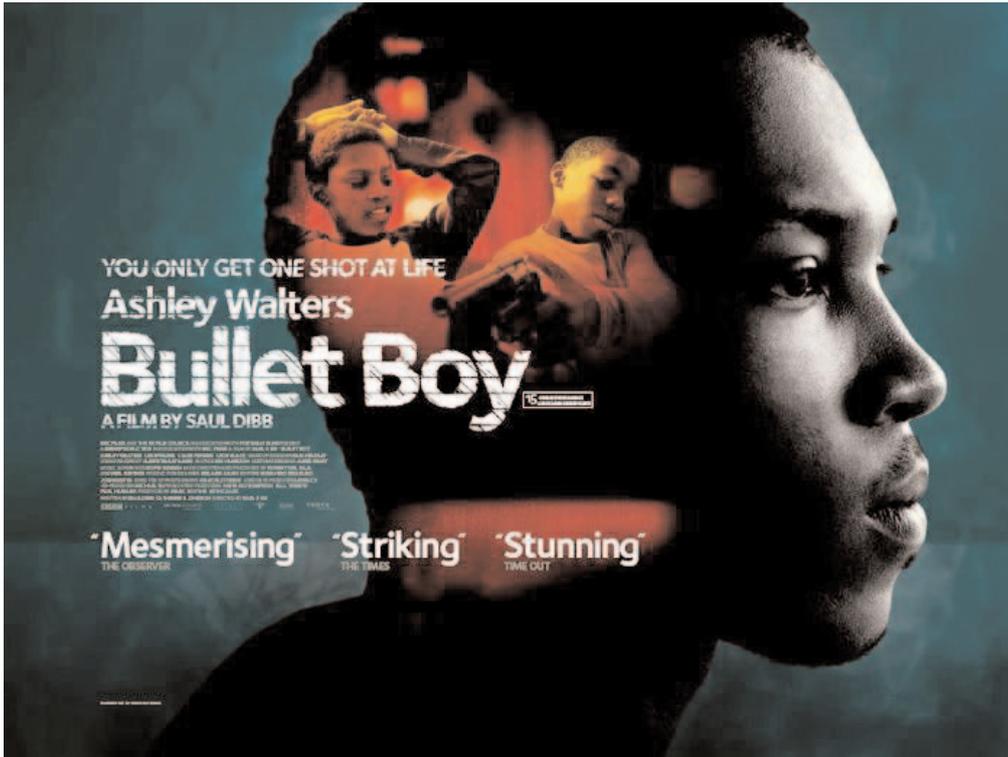
In the past, films which dealt with 'black issues' (as distinct from Hollywood films which feature black stars such as Wesley Snipes, Halle Berry and Will Smith) would often have a very limited release. UK film exhibitors would mainly distribute specifically 'black-themed' films to multiplexes in big cities with a significant black population, or to arthouse cinemas.

But Verve Pictures, who handled the release of *Bullet Boy*, recognised that the film had wider appeal. Its unique selling point was that the cast included Ashley Walters - whose own life in many ways mirrored that of the film's main character. With the help of lottery money from the UK Film Council's Printing and Advertising fund, Verve were able to give *Bullet Boy* a much wider distribution.

Verve's strategy paid off. Within the first six months of its release, *Bullet Boy* had grossed £450,000, a substantial sum for a low-budget UK film, at the UK box office. Most of this money had been made at carefully selected urban multiplex cinemas rather than the arthouse cinemas *Bullet Boy* had originally been destined for.

TASK

- Because it is one of the most obviously dramatic sequences in the film all the trailers for *Bullet Boy* begin with the police raid on Ricky's family's flat. Which other sequence(s) from the film would be suitable to begin a trailer for *Bullet Boy*?



One of the trailers for *Bullet Boy* begins with the alarming tagline ‘There are thousands of guns in our streets...This is the story of one’. Although in the background of the poster for the film we can see Curtis and Rio with a gun, the dominant image is Ashley Walters’ head rather than a gun-toting ‘gangsta’ and the tag line ‘You only get one shot at life’. Design an alternative poster, with a tagline, for the film which features neither Walters nor a gun.

THE SO SOLID FACTOR

The film’s success was due in no small part to the presence of Ashley Walters starring in his first feature film. Although Ashley Walters has an established background in TV drama he is better known to the film’s main target audience as Asher D, a member of So Solid Crew, the 20-plus collective of London DJs, MCs and producers, who enjoyed UK chart success with garage and hip hop anthems such as ‘Oh No (Sentimental Things)’ (1999) and ‘21’ Seconds (2001).

TRIVIA

Walters recently won a debate at the prestigious Cambridge University, arguing that rap was better than philosophy.

TASK

- Discuss with a partner who you think the film's main target audience is. Support your answer with evidence from what you know about the marketing of the film, Ashley Walters and the film's content and themes.

So Solid Crew has gained media notoriety because of their involvement in violent crime. Carl Morgan, a producer with So Solid Crew, was sentenced to thirty years in prison after being found guilty of murdering his love rival. At the trial, Judge Brian Barker told Morgan, *'Gun use is the scourge of our streets and causes misery and distress.'* Dwayne Vincent (Megaman of So Solid Crew) is facing a retrial on charges connected with the murder and other members of So Solid Crew have been involved in violent incidents.

Walters was serving an eighteen-month prison sentence for carrying a loaded shotgun when he read the script for *Bullet Boy* and so brings an added 'authenticity' to *Bullet Boy* which has not harmed the success of the film. Walters has been candid in interviews about his violent past: *'A lot of people will say that going to prison was the worst thing that could have happened but I needed to be taken out of that equation...Who knows what would have happened? What if I'd used my gun? What if someone had used it on me?'*

Walters emphasises that he is not 'Ricky': *'Playing Ricky was a big challenge though people don't believe it. A lot of people are like you're just playing yourself, innit?...Obviously I was in prison and came out with the same attitude in not wanting to lead that life anymore.'* However, he inevitably makes some connections between his own life and Ricky's: *'Ricky is a lot like myself...I could relate to him because obviously I've been to jail...and I've grown up in a similar environment, so I brought a lot of me into the part...I think prison helped me a lot doing this role because I was able to understand the thoughts that go through your head when you come out.'*

But although in interviews he has hinted at an autobiographical element to the film, Walters' performance is admirably responsible and restrained. Walters comments that, *'While you're in jail, you'd wish that the world would stop and wait for you to come out, but obviously it doesn't. So when you come out, it's very bewildering, it's overwhelming and I think it's hard to capture that feeling unless you've experienced it yourself.'*

Walters has not brought any 'showbiz' glamour or 'bling' to a film which takes pains to avoid the clichés of American 'gangsta' movies with their resolutely downbeat 'no way out of the ghetto' messages. He is aware of his responsibilities as a role model and keen for his fans in the audience to heed the film's message: *'I've got to the point where I know I can't go back to prison so I can't pick up a gun again...I don't fear no one no more. Personally what I feel I'm doing is something positive not only for me but for a lot of black kids out there to aspire to something like this.'*

TASK

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of encouraging an audience to believe that an actor is playing himself on screen?

REALISM AND AUTHENTICITY

Much of the success of *Bullet Boy* depends on its convincing an audience that its plot, location and characters are 'realistic' in a way in which they are not in films such as 'Spiderman', 'Lord of The Rings' or a James Bond movie. Yet these films create their own 'reality' for an audience which will be disconcerted or puzzled if the accepted 'rules', frequently generic conventions, are subverted in some fashion.

For example, we accept that Spiderman's ability to climb up walls derives from the fact that he was bitten by a genetically modified spider rather than from the magic slippers he was given by the goddess Athena. Similarly, Gandalf does not defeat Sauron through his easy access to nuclear weapons or to the years he spent studying at the feet of an ancient Buddhist martial arts expert. And James Bond's unerring ability to seduce women and thwart attempts to dominate the world are in no way due to the magic ring he was given by his fairy godmother. Such films are worlds away from a 'realistic' TV series such as *EastEnders* which is firmly located in a world from which magic and androids from the future have been banished. However, long lost relations reappear, the believed-to-be-dead return to the series and nobody ever switches on the television to find that *Coronation Street* or, even less probable, *EastEnders* is on!

Saul Dibb was anxious to ensure that his film should be as 'realistic' as possible. He has a background in documentary filmmaking so is used to doing research. He visited the Dalston Youth Project in Hackney and discussed his project with the teenagers there. *'I tried to persuade people to talk to me, openly, which obviously was a difficult thing to do given the fact that some of them were involved in the whole gun thing,'* he says. *'It was amazing to discover how their lives were in some ways very naïve, very innocent, at the same time they'd seen terrible things happen to them or their families.'*

Local residents were recruited as actors to give a sense of authenticity, in terms of how they look, act (i.e. move) and most importantly, how they speak. Slang and patois, e.g. 'Stupidness, innit, bredren, sometink', are spoken throughout the film to emphasise authenticity/credibility of the dialogue, even at the risk of offering the 'outsider' a slightly stereotyped view of 'black youth'.

Author Catherine Johnson worked with Dibb on the script. Johnson, then writer-in-residence at Holloway Women's Prison, has lived in and around Hackney for most of her life. *'Working with Catherine was great, she's very good with kids and doesn't find it difficult to see the world from a kid's perspective,'* says Dibb.

As a mother with two children and a writer of teenage fiction, Johnson decided to focus more on Ricky's relationship with his family: *'What I thought I could bring to the story was a down-to-earth quality,'* says Johnson. *'I wanted it to be about kids, not about gangsters. These are just ordinary kids, who have fewer choices than a lot of other kids their age.'*

NOT JUST ANOTHER 'GANGSTA' MOVIE

'Bullet Boy felt like a story that had been waiting to be told,' says Saul Dibb. *'There have been situations like this, involving kids with guns for about the last ten years in London. But nobody has tried to tell it from a human point of view, to get inside a family and try to show that there's more involved than what you read in the newspaper headlines.'*

The film avoids 'easy'/stereotypical/predictable/clichéd targets. We see no explicit examples of racist behaviour: there are no National Front skinheads or prejudiced employers; there's no background of crime or drug-dealing. Aside from Curtis and Rio's truancy and dope-smoking, the only crimes we see are those committed by young black men intent on upholding their reputations.

Bullet Boy has been accused of being predictable, partly because it touches on many of the usual 'causes' for the problems that assail Ricky's family. However, it engages an audience through its well-defined main characters who never drift into easy stereotypes. Each character is given a sense of their own individuality and the film contains much good-natured humour and a sense of the camaraderie that exists between people trying to improve their lives, even while violent events conspire to destroy them. Because we care about what happens to the characters and because the film never offers any simple solutions we find its anti-gun message credible and persuasive without ever being condescending.

TASK

- Select three key sequences or pieces of dialogue from the film which you believe make clear the film's message. For example, Ricky's mother angrily tells Ricky *'You might as well have put the bloody thing in his hand!'*

Bullet Boy offers an alternative to the glamourisation of violence which is regularly used merely as a means to sell CDs, films and fashionable clothing. Designer labels, expensive trainers, women in shorts, jewellery and general 'bling' are quite absent from Ricky's world. Whilst for much of the film we view the action from Ricky's point of view we are never encouraged to find what happens engaging, glamorous or exciting. The film's one sex scene is perfunctory and – considering that Ricky has just been released from prison – rather unsatisfactory.

Ricky's girlfriend, Shea, is not presented as a fantasy, glamorous, piece of 'eye candy'. Sharea Mounira Samuels (who plays Shea) says that *'I liked playing Shea because she reminded me of myself. We come from the same type of areas and I could see why she's drawn to Ricky. But at the same time she's quite strong-minded.'* Shea is as confused as Ricky

but is able to accept that, rather than blame the place or the situation, she must take responsibility for her own actions. Her break with Ricky may seem like a betrayal but it is the only intelligent course to follow if the alternative is loyalty to a man/boy unable to break with his old (childhood?) allegiances.

The violent feud which concludes with Ricky's murder starts over a trivial incident and escalates mainly because of character defects rather than because of inexorable external forces - such as racism or social repression. It's only about halfway through the film that we learn why Ricky was imprisoned and how he believes his one violent action has damned him in the community: *'If I stay round people will just drag me back down'* because they will always know who he is: *"There's Ricky the boy who stabbed up that youth' - You know how I am – that ain't me,"* he tells Shea. Rather than boast about his crime, Ricky is desperate to distance himself from this violent action:

TASK

- Draw up a point-by-point chart which shows how Winston's argument with the van driver leads to Ricky's murder. Make clear the connections between each event and alternative actions which would have 'defused' the situation. For example, after he'd broken the wing mirror, Winston could simply have apologised and offered to pay for the damage.

TASK

- When Ricky visits Godfrey and tries to distance himself from the shooting of the dog Godfrey refuses to be placated and refers to the dog as his 'bredren'. Does this affect the way we think about Godfrey as a character? Why do you think the image of the dead dog is repeated throughout the film?

TASK

- Look again at the sequence after Ricky is taken away by the armed police. We see him being interviewed but we only hear Ricky's dialogue. Why do you think the audience are not allowed to hear what the police, solicitors, social workers etc. have to say?

TASK

- Consider the connotations of the word 'bullet'. For example, 'Faster than a speeding bullet' was the phrase used to describe the all-powerful Superman. The title *Bullet Boy* could refer to several of the characters in the film. Discuss with a partner which character most merits the title *Bullet Boy*.

MAN AND BOY

Dibb wanted to tell the story of *Bullet Boy* from the children's point of view, especially that of the twelve-year-old: *'What I wanted was an innocent's point of view on an adult world,'* says Dibb. *'It seemed like being twelve was a kind of critical time for boys when they think they're turning into men. So you've got a twelve-year-old boy who's not even a teenager yet he's still gonna have to start behaving like he's a man, or he's gonna get picked on, he's gonna get pushed around. Then you've got a nineteen-year-old as well who from a distance looks like a man but at the same time he's still struggling with those issues internally.'*

Both the 'powerless' Ricky and Curtis are being propelled by forces, seemingly outside their control, towards maturity. Both characters lack a genuine mentor figure, a wise father-substitute who can offer them guidance as they hurtle towards adulthood. No reference is made to the absent father – Ricky has to act as both older brother and father figure to Curtis. Leo offers himself as a mentor to Ricky but his advice – *'It's a never-ending circle; just goes round and round...it don't lead nowhere'* - is dismissed as 'preaching' or 'stupidness' and the film remains ambiguous about the efficacy of religion to offer worthwhile support for someone like Ricky.

TASK

- The part played by religion in Ricky's community is important but the film never seeks to offer Christianity as a straightforward alternative to the world Ricky is dragged back to. Even the relationship between Ricky's mother and Leo is kept deliberately ambiguous. Look again at the film's final sequence. The church service is intercut with Ricky's arrival at the station and his murder, whilst the soundtrack is dominated by the hymn 'Amazing Grace'. Why do you think the director chose to connect the two sequences in this way?

The nearest thing that Ricky has to a mentor is the ironically-named Wisdom. Leon Black (who plays Wisdom) says that *'I know loads of people like Wisdom so I just have to switch onto what's going on in his head...I think Wisdom's got a volatile personality because he ain't got no friends, Ricky's his only bredren, and when Ricky's been inside, Wisdom's just been on his own, hustling. Also he's grown up without his parents around, so he's got no guidance.'*

TASK

- As a young man, Ricky seems woefully ill-prepared to enter the world of adults: no job, still sharing a room with his little brother. Curtis has access to his big brother's 'girly mags', plays violent 'beat-em-up' computer games and calls his friend 'man' or 'blood' like his older brother but he is being dragged into maturity before his time, forced to tend to himself as his mother goes off to work and deprived of any proper adult mentor. Does Ricky offer any explicit advice to Curtis that you consider to be useful or sensible? What similarities/differences are there in the Curtis/Rio relationship compared with that of Ricky/Wisdom?

'I ain't leaving the manor' states Wisdom, harking back unintentionally but aptly to a bygone age when each individual's circumstances and status were fixed irrevocably. Winston is shown to be locked into a rigid, antiquated world which destroys him. *'This is just a place,'* counters Ricky who is determined to leave, to go somewhere, anywhere else. Although he dies through his allegiance to Wisdom's outmoded code of feudal loyalty, Ricky recognises that change and development are possible, that the bloody past and its pervasive and destructive 'stupidness' can be left behind.

Curtis is left to consider a world of extremes: *'Better a mummy's boy than a crackhead,'* he opines. Are these the only possibilities for a twelve-year-old boy? Although, in the end, Curtis throws the gun away, there are hints that the old traditions and allegiances will be carried on by the younger generation. Rio is eager to get back to school so he can display his gunshot wound to his admiring schoolmates. *'You owe me big time,'* Rio reminds Curtis. Are we witnessing the beginning of a Wisdom/Ricky relationship?

Several of the Ashley Walters quotes come from an article in Blink, *'Faster than a speeding bullet boy,'* by Sophia Jackson (6/4/2005)

SUGGESTED VIEWING

Kes (1969) (Ken Loach)

Bullet Boy was sold to the BBC as 'Kes with guns'. Young Billy Casper escapes from his grim existence when he catches and trains a kestrel.

The Harder They Come (1972) (Perry Henzell)

'With a Piece in His Hand He Takes on the Man!' read the tagline. A poor Jamaican (played by reggae star Jimmy Cliff) struggles to make a living in the corrupt Jamaican music industry but is driven to a life of gun-crime.

Pressure (1975) (Horace Ové)

The first feature film made by a black director in Britain. A compelling portrait of inter-generational tensions.

La Haine (Mathieu Kassovitz) (1995)

Visceral piece of 'cinema du banlieue' shot in grainy black and white. The film focuses on the violent events which unravel when a policeman's gun is lost on a multi-racial estate.

Bowling For Columbine (Michael Moore) (2002)

Tagline 'Are we a nation of gun nuts or are we just nuts?' Moore's 'personality-documentary' investigates America's love affair with guns.

City Of God (Fernando Meirelles) (2002)

Electrifying film set in the slums of Rio in a terrifying world of gun-toting, drug-dealing gangs of children. A world away from the lives of Curtis and Rio...so far.

Dear Wendy (Thomas Vinterberg) (2005)

Lars von Trier scripted this curious film which looks at a gun club, bound by elaborate codes of honour, in a nameless American town. An oblique comment on America's gun culture.

Boyz n the Hood (John Singleton) (1991)

Three friends grow up together, striving to maintain their pride and code of honour, in an environment that surrounds them with violence, alcohol, and crime.

Menace II Society (Albert & Allen Hughes) (1993)

After graduating from high school, Caine Lawson attempts to escape his violent existence in the projects of Watts, California.

INTERNET RESOURCES

<http://bulletboy.net/making/>

Official film site. Contains much useful information on the film's production. Two versions of the trailer can be downloaded here.

<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/distribution/distribution6.html>

The BFI's detailed case study of Bullet Boy which focuses on distribution.

<http://www.bfi.org.uk/education/teaching/blackworld/>

Notes on 'Pressure' and 'Burning An Illusion' as well as teaching resources for 'teaching black film'.

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