Ghettos and barrios

By the late 1960s, virtually all American cities with significant black populations had come to house large ghettos characterized by extreme segregation and spatial isolation.

Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton

People get tired because their daily life is so hopeless. You have to put some sort of entertainment out there. Let them live through your triumph vicariously. . .

Pam Grier

Learning objectives

- To gain insight into sociologically and historically based definitions of racial ghettos
- To comprehend the different ways in which studios and independent filmmakers capture the urban ghetto and enclave on film

- To outline the different kinds of spatial politics associated with ghettocentric films
- To capture the cinematic ghetto aesthetic in urban, national, and transnational contexts

Introduction

This lesson traces accounts of urban segregation and the constitution of ghettos in the industrial West as a framework for marginal film production. It illustrates how ghetto aesthetics in cinema share in larger cultural practices of recycling – the birth of hip hop, fashion, graffiti, urban murals – that have led to an infrastructure based on a continuum of semi-legal, illegal, and criminal activity of self-fashioned recirculating of goods and refashioning of images.

These kinds of representations can be traced from mid-twentieth-century Italian neorealism, via the African-American Blaxploitation boom of the late 1960s and the politically inflected, Afrocentric, independent, art-house cinema, to Spike Lee's independent cinema and the mainstreaming of "the ghetto film," the birth of which the US saw with John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood* (1991).

The mainstream success of this genre, which paralleled the transnational crossover success of black hip hop music, led to an increased production within the US and a transnationalization of a formulaic genre expressed in such films as Brazilian Fernando Meirelles's City of God (2002) and South African Gavin Hood's Tsotsi (2005).

These mainstreamed, high production-value, ghetto films appropriate and fashion a ghetto style and generic narrative formula that are detached from any political analysis of urban reality offered by urban studies and the lived experience of ghettos, barrios, and ethnic neighborhoods.

Beyond this contemporary transnational and national appropriation that exploits fantasies of poverty for action-filled stories, however, ghettocentric representations by and about marginalized immigrants and other minority communities – be it French-Africans, Afro-British, or Turkish-Germans – have emerged from around the world.

The timeline in this chapter is different from earlier chapters in that it relies on the more famous films to trace hidden influences. I begin with an early paradigmatic account of the ghetto by W.E.B. Du Bois in order to arrive at an important moment in the US, the early 1990s, when it saw the birth of the contemporary, urban, ghetto film which laid the foundation for the transnational genre as we know it now.

I trace the influences of the contemporary genre back to distinct representational phenomena in the 1970s: Blaxploitation and independent Black Cinema in the US. The latter then leads us back in history to the postwar period in Italy and the development of Italian neorealism, with two examples from the early 1960s.

The lesson ends with a summary of contemporary variations of films about the ghetto and a case study of The Harder They Come (Perry Henzell, 1972), an important Jamaican film which recycles American and national myths and genre conventions in a setting that takes its political impetus from its authentic portrayal of Jamaica. To avoid confusion in tracing influences forwards and backwards in history, years have been added in front of the section headings.

1890: the spatialization of the “negro problem”

Even though the focus here is on cinematic representations of urban ghettoization in the late twentieth century, neither the social discussion of living conditions – the spatial limitations, and the class, racial, and ethnic dimensions of ghettoization – nor its cinematic representation belongs only to the twentieth century.

W.E.B. Du Bois's essay "The Negro Problem of Philadelphia," published in this book The Philadelphia Negro, written in the 1890s while he was living in the African-American neighborhood of Philadelphia, is a paradigmatic account of the racial ghetto in the late nineteenth century, which emphasizes diversity from within.

The quest to understand the “Negro problem” through “a study of Negroes in the Seventh Ward, the city’s Black ghetto,” illustrates the conflation of American minorities with the perceived problems of urban blight.

Du Bois saw the ghetto as “a city within a city” whose members “do not form an integral part of the larger social group,” and proposed that this is not an unusual phenomenon, since there are other unassimilated ethnic groups in the city, such as Jews and Italians. But he modified his position that degrees of segregation are normal by emphasizing the “conspicuous” segregation of African-Americans.

Du Bois’s account gives much description of particular streets and their surroundings, the conditions and the material of the houses, and the histories of specific riots. He aligns individuals with various streets, alleys, houses, and apartments, according to profession and income. He also differentiates the level of noise and criminal and violent activity, having in mind the stereotypes of ghetto inhabitants.

However, in contrast to other studies, these stereotypes were not his primary concern, but rather the effect of discrimination on the opportunities and choices in terms of labor, and the money that can flow into the neighborhoods in question. Du Bois's study continues to be important today because it includes a subtle account of the diversity within the ghetto.

1991: “the new ghetto aesthetic”

A century later, in the early 1990s, the ghetto suddenly had its moment in the limelight in a wave of highly successful crossover films. Jacquie Jones's "The New Ghetto Aesthetic" observes a new popular phenomenon at the time, the ghetto film, and makes a critical intervention in its representational politics. At the end of 1991, Jones takes stock of a slew of films by African-American directors that take place in the "contemporary urban ghetto" and concludes: "Only one . . . contains a valuable leading role for a Black female actor.

And none are directed by Black women". Her essay provides a critical stocktaking of the explosion in new Black film, which according to her follows Hollywood conventions and therefore neither undermines existing racial or gender politics. Instead, Jones interprets this new output as a result of "its marketability," because "Hollywood hopes to capitalize on the success of recent low-budget Black-made films" in creating "a battery of films which 'illuminate' the life of the young Black male, the nation's most recent sociological curiosity"

Jones implies here that these films cater to a voyeuristic audience simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by a fantasy about the ghetto as a taboo zone in need of explication and translation. She contrasts the economic successes of the time, such as Mario Van Peebles's *New Jack City* (1991), which shows Harlem's "crimeinfested Black ghetto," to the engagement of his father,

Melvin Van Peebles, in “guerilla” filmmaking: “Yet while the elder Van Peebles envisioned the law as necessarily an enemy of Black people, the younger positions it as a savior to Black people in communities fraught with self-imposed lawlessness”. And she contrasts the audience and financial success of *New Jack City* and *Boyz N the Hood* with low-budget film indebted to independent Black cinema that could not find distributors.

Jones describes the American urban ghetto films that show the ghetto as masculinist, undifferentiated, and utterly violent, and turn the ghetto into a commodity that feeds liberal racist and sexist anxieties and desires of mainstream America.

1991 became the year of the new American urban ghetto film when John Singleton's Boyz N the Hood (1991) and Mario Van Peebles's New Jack City (1991) hit the big screen. Both tell stories of violence among urban Blacks associated with drugs and gang warfare and are set in decaying urban locales made to represent such problems as policing, drugs, gentrification; lack of jobs, resources, and education; incarceration and gang warfare. Boyz N the Hood takes place in south-central Los Angeles, and New Jack City in New York City.

The American ghetto films from the early 1990s reflect urban changes in the late 1980s. William Julius Wilson describes the intensification of poverty during the early 1990s in American inner cities in contrast to the post-Second World War period: In 1959, less than one-third of the poverty population in the United States lived in metropolitan central cities. By 1991, the central cities included close to half of the nation’s poor. Many of the most rapid increases in concentrated poverty have occurred in African-American neighborhoods.

1971–73: ghetto fabulousness

Blaxploitation denotes low-budget action films located in urban environments centered on hyperbolic Black heroes. The low-budget films emphasized action and exaggerated narratives because directors did not have access to the studio system's high-quality mise-en-scène, costume, and editing. Melvin Van Peebles independently produced and directed Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (1971) with an all-Black crew and cast.

The visible low budget and the circulation in inner-city B-movie theaters result from a lack of resources, which in turn mirrors the conditions of the ghetto in the film's cinematic practices. Once the studios realized the potential for the success of Blaxploitation, however, they mimicked the low-budget quality and exploited the conventions of sexualized and violent representation of African-Americans.

Blaxploitation film Black Caesar (1973), by Larry Cohen, follows the Scarface gangster narrative formula within a ghetto narrative. Tommy, the fatherless son of a Black maid, had been abused by a white policeman as a child and rises as a gangster until he is betrayed by his woman and his best friend from childhood. The story is set in Manhattan, New York City, and much of the narrative is determined by the characters' movement through the city.

Tommy’s original home is a dilapidated building, to which he returns twice, once when his absent father reappears and again at the very end of the film, after he has been shot repeatedly. Tommy’s hope to rise in the mob is challenged when one of the mobsters says to him, “They’ll never accept a nigger in the syndicate,” and he answers, “Everybody is a liberal today, accept it.”

His meteoric rise as a gangster is due to his “smarts,” with which he is able to buy his white lawyer’s apartment, including the maid who is revealed to be his mother. The film offers a fantasy of hyperbolic success through illegal activity, but portrays the escape from the ghetto as impossible, since it reproduces itself through senseless violence. In contrast to the new ghetto film, however, Black Caesar is motivated by a primal scene of humiliating and violent racism that motivates the narrative and invites viewers’ identification.

1976–1977: beauty and struggle

Charles Burnett's Killer of Sheep (1977) takes place in south-central Los Angeles and tells the story of an all-Black environment determined by poverty, but its look is entirely and strikingly different from that of either Blaxploitation or the contemporary ghetto film. The extreme close-ups and the absence of establishing shots create a space that is defined by relationships and labor, and poverty is invoked but also permanently redeemed through the cinematic beauty of the stark and gritty but beautifully composed black-and-white shots.

The urban spaces that Burnett creates cinematically eschew violence, destruction, limitation, and the breaking down of social structures. Instead, Killer of Sheep follows the emotional toil and the pleasure of everyday life, including showing children playing, throwing stones at each other, running, singing in the playground, dressing up, riding bikes, and counting while making handstands against house walls.

The many scenes of children playing outside and inside the house are interwovenwith snippets of the everyday life of the main nuclear family, the husband Sam, his wife, and their son and daughter. Their daily activities include house repairs, trying to buy a used engine to replace the one in the car, sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee, playing dominoes, relaxing in the living room, and working.

Charles Burnett. Killer of Sheep (1977): The aesthetics of the everyday

1961–1962: Italian neorealism – walking through Rome’s ruins

The aesthetic realism in the portrayal of urban poverty in Killer of Sheep and Bush Mama invokes Italian neorealism, a movement from the early 1940s that focused on films set among the poor and working class in Italy, shot in blackand-white on location, using lay actors. Pier Paolo Pasolini's Accattone (1961) and Mamma Roma (1962) portray urban poverty in on-location shooting that captures the gritty reality of marginal lives on the outskirts of Rome.

Accattone shows the transition from poor rural housing to the modern housing projects on the outskirts of Rome through the story of a pimp. Mamma Roma is similarly set in the housing projects around Rome where Mamma Roma, an aging prostitute, is raising her son and desperately trying to prevent him from becoming a criminal.

Pier Paolo Pasolini. Accattone (1961): Walking through the construction sites in Rome's outskirts

The neo-realist films Accattone and Mamma Roma reflect class organization in the city of Rome, which differs from the dynamics of cities in the United States. The urban poor are not contained in the inner city, but in new buildings built on the periphery of the metropolis during the early 1960s. The majority of shots in Accattone and Mamma Roma therefore show the no-man's-land between the new and impersonal housing construction and the empty spaces surrounding the buildings, which include some ruins.

In Mamma Roma the modern architecture and the ruins create an in-between space that is reminiscent of the “desert of the real” that is shown to Neo in The Matrix and the post-apocalyptic landscape in Things to Come, but results from urban planning and housing construction that do not integrate the past with the present. These voids create the spaces where the youth of the area come together, and where Mamma Roma’s son develops into a thief who by the end of the film is under arrest.

In contrast to him, Mamma Roma belongs to the past of Rome, walking through the city, integrating what feminists have analyzed as the whore–virgin mother dichotomy. She sacrifices herself for her son and does not want him to find out that she is a prostitute, but makes herself vulnerable to blackmail. One important scene shows her walking the streets of Rome at night, telling a story, while different men drift in and out of her company and the cinematic frame.

In the old part of the city, Mamma Roma is a storyteller, in touch with her own and Rome’s past. But in the new construction site, in a land for migrants and nomads where organic ties are destroyed and ruins have lost their meaning, she cannot protect her son. In the end, her son is arrested by the police and tied to a table. Haunted by nightmares, he wants to return to the country, cries for his mother, and feels sick.

1968–2005: from then to now – the ghetto film goes global

The discourse on ghettoization is entrenched with class and racial stratification but it is also linked with migration in its two common forms of rural to urban and from one nation to another. The migration from the countryside to the city and the settlement in limited and poor areas there is also portrayed in other national cinemas, for example in the Turkish film *The Horse* (Ali Özgentürk, 1982). A father and son are moving to the city, and the father acquires a cart, which he pushes through the city of Istanbul.

Attractive images of the city, with its famous mosques, contrast with the limited space the father and son can experience, until finally the father dies in an altercation and the son has to return home alone. The use of lay actors and an emphasis on young men in the public sphere also characterize early American films about ethnic enclaves in such films as Martin Scorsese's Who's That Knocking on my Door? (1968).

These have in turn been recycled in three contemporary transnational versions depicting the urban minority ghetto: first, the immigration comedy, such as Damien O'Donnell's East Is East (1999); second, the films in the tradition of Italian neorealism, such as Thomas Arslan's Brothers and Sisters (1997); and, third, the transnational ghetto blockbuster, such as Fernando Meirelles's City of God (2003) and Gavin Hood's Tsotsi (2005).

In the US, the ghetto-centered action film has become a formula used as a vehicle primarily for rap stars, witness Jim Sheridan's Get Rich or Die Tryin' (2005), in which the rap artist 50 Cent claims to tell his rags-to-riches story. The hyperbolic ghetto fabulousness which exaggerates the accoutrements associated with ghetto style figures, such as "the pimp" or "the ho," can be traced back to Blaxploitation,

while the socially critical realism can in turn be traced back to the independent Black cinema of Gerima and Burnett, which in turn echoes Italian neorealism. Because Hollywood dominates the international market, films like *City of God* and *Tsotsi* from the national cinemas of Brazil and South Africa can be economically successful internationally by mimicking the American urban ghetto film that exploits the representation of poverty.

The mass distribution of Third World films fetishizing the violence of the ghetto at the cost of low-budget films that more subtly address issues of urban poverty not only creates a misconception about the urban poor in specific Third World countries, but also lends itself to seeing entire Third World countries as ghettos. Several classic Third World films have focused on an inside look at slums and ghettos,

İncluding Mira Nair's Salaam Bombay! (1988), Euzhan Palcy's Sugarcane Alley (Martinique, 1983), Marcel Camus's Black Orpheus (Brazil, 1959), Luis Buñuel's Los Olvidados (Mexico, 1950), and The Horse (Turkey). The case study which follows shows how one film from the small Jamaican national film industry can, however, successfully negotiate this complex national and international terrain.