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Media Images of the Urban Landscape: the South Bronx in Film

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ABSTRACT

This essay will argue the importance of film media’s influence on contemporary American attitudes towards race in an urban context. The essay will focus on Hollywood’s changing representation of the South Bronx, which became a symbol of urban ills in American inner cities in the 1970s and 1980s, and how this representation became more positive in the 1990s. The paper will explore the “chicken and egg” syndrome: whether media only reacts to reality, or actually influences behavior and in turn reality. First it will be essential to look at the case of the Bronx in a historical context, particularly because what happened to the Bronx paralleled the decline of many urban areas across the nation. The question will be posed as to the future of inner city areas in American culture now that the picture of the inner city is looking rosier. Is this change in focus merely due to economic change? Will it disappear once the economy turns downward again, or is it part of a wider trend, a reinvestment in our cities? And how will the events of September 11 impact on Hollywood’s representation of American cities?

[Key words: South Bronx, film and media studies, urban history, racism, ethnicity]
Two policemen sit in a car next to an abandoned parking lot. As the elevated train passes by, a tall, attractive black woman with a blonde wig crosses the street toward them. It's obvious when she comes closer that she is drugged. She's wearing a flowered, sleeveless dress; her purse hangs by her side from her left hand.

"Ain't she freezing?" one officer asks the other.

"No, she's so wacked she thinks she's in the Bahamas!" the other one jokes.

With a stoned smile on her face, she leans over to speak to the police officers, exposing her ample cleavage.

"Y'all wanna come party with me? I got something fine for New York's finest."

Suddenly, the woman grabs a gun from her purse and shoots both of the officers. As she walks off unsteadily over the rubble of the empty lot, five men emerge slowly out of the surrounding abandoned buildings. They quickly rob the dead officers, pulling one of them half way out of the car, and walk away.

The opening scene of *Fort Apache: the Bronx* clearly sets a tone for the way Bronx residents will be represented in this film, a representation that left an impression on its large American audiences. Charlotte, the prostitute/murderess played by Pam Grier, represents the South Bronx to the outside world: dark, enticing, immoral, and dangerous. Hollywood's images of the urban landscape from the 1980s and '90s are exaggerations of earlier historical anxieties about cities, race, and ethnicity, as well as reactions to the realities of urban problems. The South Bronx, a stark picture of the devastation of urban areas in the 1970s, was a symbol to the nation and even the world of what had gone wrong in urban America.

In its earlier history, this neighborhood became a “staging ground for the American dream”; the borough was a shining example of a successful city. One of its boulevards, the Grand Concourse, was proudly modeled after the Champs-Elysees. The Bronx was a step on the road to success for its immigrant residents. By the 1970s and ‘80s, the lower Bronx, renamed the South Bronx, was in a different place. The neighborhood had become emblematic of abandonment and demonization. Americans were shocked by images of this scarred neighborhood, with its burning buildings and rubble-strewn lots seen in film, television, and newspaper reports. Visits by Presidents Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and other public officials to the infamous Charlotte Street did little to change the devastation. Earlier residents lamented the disappearance of their bustling neighborhoods. Journalists and visitors continually compared the area south of the Cross Bronx Expressway to war-torn Beirut and Dresden. By the 1980s, the entire borough carried the stigma of the South Bronx.

Visual media in the late 1970s and ‘80s had a powerful effect on Americans in its depiction of cities. Media portrayal of the South Bronx and other troubled urban areas in the 1970s and ‘80s reflected real problems. Films often exaggerated the public’s fears and perceptions, however, particularly where race and crime were concerned.¹ Although the lower end of the borough was not free of its scars from the past two decades, by the 1990s, newspaper and magazine articles were calling the South Bronx an urban miracle.² The South Bronx still had high unemployment, terrible schools, and problems with crime. However, a distinct change had taken place by the 1990s.
By the year 2001, prior to the tragedy of September 11, Hollywood film media appeared to be softening its manner of presenting cities. A review of the film media’s treatment of the South Bronx and its residents suggests broader national implications for America’s cities and American attitudes towards race. A comparison of two films, 1980’s *Fort Apache: the Bronx* and *Finding Forrester* from the year 2000 will indicate a change in the way Hollywood represented the South Bronx. This marked difference raises some essential questions about the meaning of this shift in the media’s focus and what it says about the way Americans see their cities.

**What Is the South Bronx?**

> Whether seen as a whole or in its constituent parts, the city is a symbol of our culture and group cultures, reflecting its values, expectations, hopes and fears.³

The South Bronx is not an exact location. Economics and race had much to do with its boundaries. In the late 1960s, the area was designated as south of the Cross Bronx Expressway.⁴ As blight spread and middle class white residents moved out, the border moved farther north to Fordham Road. In 1995, a *New York Times* article quoted a Bronx resident naming the border as Mosholu Parkway, even farther north.⁵ In 2001, the Bronx Borough President’s office, tired of the stigma, claimed that the South Bronx no longer existed as a term, and stated that people were either using neighborhood names or the name of the entire borough instead.⁶ Whether the South Bronx exists and the designation of its exact boundaries may be in dispute, but in 2001, the term was still used to describe the southern end of the borough. References to the South Bronx will indicate the area south of Fordham Road.⁷

**Image and Reality: Visual Culture and Race**

> white middle class imagination, absent from any first-hand knowledge of inner-city conditions, magnifies the perceived threat through a demonological lens.⁸
> The professional middle class generally avoids slums like the plague, or escapes from them to greener suburbs, or mystifies them in crime films.... ⁹

America has become a more visual culture with the impact of both film and television. The national impact of the image has become greater than that of the written word.¹⁰ As a result, in the 1980s and ’90s, people were quite likely to remember the dark streets full of pimps, hookers, burnt-out cars, and blazing fires from the films *Fort Apache: the Bronx* or *Bonfire of the Vanities*, or Howard Cosell in 1977 announcing the burning of the Bronx while images of a flaming building appeared on the television screen. It was less probable that many people would remember a newspaper article discussing economic revitalization or construction of new housing. Films allow us to look at what images Hollywood projects and how successful the media industry is in selling these images to the viewing public, giving us an important glimpse at societal attitudes.¹¹

In the 1950s and ’60s, filmmakers dealing with urban problems were accused of exaggeration. After the racialization of poverty in the news media in the 1960s, however, films began to draw an even more obvious race line between “heroic” white police officers and “deviant” black and Latino city residents of urban neighborhoods.¹² By exaggerating the worst of urban woes in American cities in the
1980s and '90s, Hollywood merely exaggerated a trend. Fantasies of the hellish world of urban blight sell: the fascination with the dramatic, with destruction and violence, is apparent when films using such images are successful at the box office. Although people go to films for many reasons, stereotypical images of the urban poor attract viewers, as is apparent when the news media focuses on sensational stories of urban poverty in order to attract more viewers. Like onlookers at the scene of a car accident slowing down traffic on a freeway, moviegoers flocked to films such as *Fort Apache* in the 1980s for a voyeuristic glimpse into this urban underworld. The success of films such as *Fort Apache* encouraged Hollywood to create exaggerated depictions of urban problems and simplified “blame the victim” explanations for urban woes.

Hollywood’s racist imagery played a large part in the creation of a mythical urban world in television and film. To filmgoers, the city became an exaggerated nightmarish world of crime; the threat of violence was ever present. White fear of urban blight in the 1980s and '90s, particularly with the onset of the crack epidemic, bordered on panic. Words for urban problems such as “crime” and “blight” had become code words for race. From the mid-1800s to the 1940s, the American concept of race was used in cities in the northeast to keep the Irish and later the Italians and Jews as well as blacks, Latinos, and others from sharing the privileges of white Protestants, particularly in housing. By the 1970s, Italians and Jews were considered white, which had become an all-encompassing category for anyone of European descent, isolating inner cities and blacks even further. Americans identified cities with “crime, minorities, deterioration, older dwellings and abandoned buildings.” Hollywood’s sensational and loaded images encouraged an even further irrational equation of race with crime. Films such as *Colors* (1988) amplified white America’s terror of inner-city blacks and Latinos to hysteria.

The myths in blockbuster films have a rippling effect, not only on the American public and their view of cities, but also on policymakers. In the development of the “broken window theory,” researchers left two cars in the street: one with a broken window and one without. They noticed how the reaction on the street was to vandalize the car with the broken window while leaving the other alone. This theory was used to stress the importance of the city’s physical environment on its residents’ attitudes and actions. In the same way, once the media tarnishes the image of the city or a neighborhood, it is difficult to reverse public perception. An irrational fear of threat may replace an analysis of real crime figures, resulting in a call for more security when it may be unnecessary. Such uninformed policy decisions can even affect city planning concerning the architecture of a neighborhood. In this domino effect, “Fear proves itself.” In the South Bronx in the 1970s, government officials realized the importance of perception. This was evident in a government official’s pitiful attempt to make people on the freeway driving by see the neighborhood differently by putting colorful decals on the windows of burnt out buildings, demonstrating an awareness of the importance of perception if not an intelligent decision about how to address it. The power of media to influence public opinion has grown enormously in the 20th century.

Politicians unfamiliar with urban America may be affected by media images. Government officials living in the suburbs are as likely to believe an urban myth as any other citizen. Important decisions on issues such as architecture and freeway locations are constructed on theories affected by a misperception of urban areas. This is why citizens and politicians in inner-city areas are so sensitive to the way the mass media depicts their communities: they realize that media imagery can have an
effect on both public perception of urban areas as well as policy decisions which affect those neighborhoods. For areas such as the South Bronx that have been in the media spotlight, images become crucial to the way the outside world sees the neighborhood. These depictions become even more important when they come to represent urban communities across the country.

Films made about Los Angeles and New York exemplify what certain films of the 1980s and ’90s did for the image of cities and stereotypes of urban residents. The films associated blacks and Latinos with crime, immorality, and urban decay. They blamed residents of troubled urban areas for unemployment and drug trafficking rather than exploring the complexity of urban troubles. In the action and drama genres, white male protagonists, often police officers, were set against Puerto Rican, black, or Mexican gang members, drug addicts, and other stereotyped criminals in movies such as Colors, set in Los Angeles, and Fort Apache: the Bronx. Because of their pseudo cinema verite style, particularly Fort Apache, which is based on the real story of two policemen in a South Bronx precinct, they were even further equated with reality in the minds of the viewing public.

Film is a powerful medium, one that thrives on violence and caricatures. Film tends to have a lag time, creating a perception based on the past. Blockbuster movies remain in American’s collective memories much longer than the period they are considering. Films about cities in the 1980s and ’90s dealt with difficulties from the previous decades. Thus, in the 1980s, many Hollywood films remained obsessed with the devastation of the inner cities, even when some areas were beginning to show signs of change. Movies focusing on crime in American cities in the 1980s and early ’90s had a lasting effect, creating images in the minds of Americans across the country. As a result, when many Americans thought of the South Bronx, even twenty years after the film was made, they pictured it looking like Fort Apache’s portrayal of 1970s South Bronx. Although it is difficult to reverse this trend, Hollywood appeared to be changing its approach to inner-city areas in the 1990s.

Two Films: the Changing Image of the South Bronx

...film is a chronoical form. Every technical element helps make allegories about social imagination.

If people cannot give us the credit we deserve, they should stop using us as a stomping grounds in movies...We are not a fictional borough.

The South Bronx has been a symbol of troubled inner-city neighborhoods across the country, an “international code word for our epoch’s accumulated urban nightmare” since the 1970s. The national news typically puts large cities like New York in the spotlight; what happened in the Bronx was a drastic case of changes occurring across the country. It was a shocking descent: the downfall of American cities was “so painful for the national psyche it transcended into the surreal.” Camile Jose Vergara’s New American Ghetto chronicles the decline of American cities from the 1970s onward in photos of Newark, the South Bronx, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Detroit. The pages look eerily similar: abandoned buildings stand next to piles of rotting garbage and rubble; once graceful historic architecture falls into disrepair; libraries, schools, and government offices are drab, square structures, and dead dogs rot on lonely streets and fire escapes. What once represented progress had become a tragic inversion of the American dream.
Metaphors for urban blight in the South Bronx were familiar ones of war and disease, reflecting the country’s anxiety over the situation of its cities and a reluctance to come to terms with real problems. Associating city neighborhoods with disease and destruction contributed to the hysteria surrounding urban problems. The South Bronx was compared to post-war Dresden, Beirut, and London, while the Cross Bronx Expressway was likened to the Maginot Line. For Americans in the 20th century, a war was fought in a faraway place: images of war provided distance for suburbanites unwilling to concern themselves with urban ills. In Los Angeles, urban blight was compared to a tooth infection needing to be cleaned out. Similarly, the problems of the South Bronx have been compared to organic diseases such as cancer attacking the body of the borough. The danger in these metaphors was how they allowed the country to avoid responsibility for what had happened: an invisible enemy or a disease made it easier to separate oneself from the real problems.

As the economy turned upwards in the 1990s, this trend began to change and in some cases even reverse to the idealism of an earlier era. In the late 1990s, in its recovery period, the South Bronx was “the edge of debate on the direction of urbanism in this country”; it was an example of economic recovery for other troubled neighborhoods. Words such as “resurrection” were used often to describe what had happened in the Bronx as well as in other recovering inner cities across the nation. Lauding the South Bronx became almost a cliché: newspaper headlines declared that the Bronx was “no longer a war zone.” New books discussed the revitalization of inner-city neighborhoods, often referring to the reconstruction of the South Bronx. The title of an exhibit at the Bronx Museum, “Devastation/Resurrection,” had a religious, even mythic connotation to it. Although the South Bronx did improve substantially by the year 2000, the Bronx was still the poorest borough in the city. Celebrating a complete recovery was still premature. This idealistic trend appeared to have had an affect on Hollywood pictures in the 1990s.


*Fort Apache* is infamous for demonizing the South Bronx. Although it was dismissed by critics, it was widely seen. The film was criticized at the time of its release and, later on, for depicting the Bronx as “a symbol of decay and crime.” The film is based on a real life police officer’s account of working in one of the most dangerous precincts in the Bronx, the 41st, nicknamed “Fort Apache” by its officers. Starring Paul Newman in the role of Murphy, the white male protagonist, the film focuses on the events surrounding the precinct and the policemen’s work there. *Fort Apache* opened with a disclaimer: it stated that because of the subject matter of the film, “it does not deal with the law abiding members of the community.” The announcement stated that the film would not consider “the efforts of the individuals and groups who are struggling to turn the Bronx around.” After the disclaimer, the film proceeded to vilify black and Latino residents of the South Bronx. Critics referred to the irony of the movie’s opening assertion. The *New York Times* noted, “The movie immortalized the borough as an unparalleled urban wasteland...a circle of hell.” Journalists asked, “Who’s going to remember the disclaimer?”

Even in its title and throughout the film, war metaphors refer to the South Bronx. One officer calls the police station a “fort in hostile territory.” Another police officer says, “You’d be better off walking a beat in Beirut than here.” At one point, a man has
to stop in the neighborhood when his car breaks down. He mutters, complaining about pulling off the highway “into this jungle.” He is enticed by Charlotte, Pam Grier’s character, into an abandoned building, where she seduces him only long enough so that she can slit his throat. This scene is a classic example of the dramatization of white fear of black and Latino inner-city neighborhoods. The freeways were built so that suburban or upper-middle-class city residents did not have to go there, especially at night. Stepping (or driving) into them meant risking one’s life.

The depiction of residents of the South Bronx was a sore point for local leaders and community groups alike. In the credits of *Fort Apache*, the police officers are given names. Most of the neighborhood characters are not. Characters are listed in the credits as Wild-Eyed Man, Hooker #1, Hooker #2, Drug Dealer, Transvestite, and Pimp. References to the South Bronx as a jungle imply that its residents are animals. *Fort Apache* shows the residents of the neighborhoods in mob-like scenes of screaming, disorderly crowds of people. Crowds appear continuously. They congregate at the police station, where an anonymous man plays the drums in one corner while children run around wildly underfoot. They gather to watch the Transvestite threaten to jump off of a building and again when the Wild-Eyed Man threatens others with a knife. In yet another scene, a horde of shouting men gathers in a basement and is arrested for illegal cockfighting. When young men from the South Bronx People’s Party, a young political organization, are arrested, their supporters surround the station house, an angry chanting mob. These characters are never shown as individuals. There is no insight into the South Bronx People’s Party: who their members were and how they came to organize. They are just another extension of the crowd. The mobs are loud, angry, unruly, chaotic, even zoo-like: all of the stereotypes that have been attributed to blacks and Latinos in inner-city neighborhoods.

In *Fort Apache*, there are very few individual characters that represent the neighborhood, and most of those who do are tragically flawed. The one character who seems to have some integrity is Isabella, the Puerto Rican nurse who becomes Murphy’s girlfriend. She is calm, educated, professional, and confident: everything that the other characters are not. However, in contrast to Murphy’s partner’s virginal Italian girlfriend, Isabella sleeps with Murphy on their first date, appealing to the audience’s conventional concepts of morality and the stereotype of the hot-blooded Latina. When Isabella is lying naked in bed, Murphy notices track marks on her calves. In the end of the movie, she overdoses, stumbling out of her apartment in a daze and collapsing on the street. Critics as well as politicians pointed out how Isabella, the one character who had the potential to combat stereotypes, could have been different.

Pam Grier’s character is called Charlotte in the credits, but her name is never mentioned in the film. In the last scene where she is seen alive, in the middle of the film, she imitates a snake, whispering, moving seductively and wiggling her tongue at a Latino drug dealer. When she slashes him in the face, he reacts by stabbing her in the stomach. Both Charlotte and Isabella are sexual objects who are demeaned and die violently. They are meant to be seen as untrustworthy and immoral. Charlotte is a murderer, a prostitute, and a drug addict. The audience is surprised to find Isabella is a drug addict as well. Reminiscent of the Latina love interest in *Colors*, who betrays the white police officer she is dating by sleeping with a gang member, Isabella ultimately disappoints Murphy when he realizes she shoots heroin. There is no depth to these one-dimensional female characters: no motive behind their actions. There are no individual male characters from the neighborhood in *Fort Apache* besides
the tortured transvestite, who tries to commit suicide in the beginning of the film, and a few sleazy drug dealers, who give Isabella the lethal dose of heroin and stab Charlotte.

Some critics recognized that *Fort Apache* tried to have a meaning beyond stereotypes, but that it was not successful in combining the police action genre with a social message: “The movie is clearly an expression of disgust at racism...shallowness and clumsiness aren’t the same as exploitation.”51 Paul Newman said that he hoped the movie would be a “positive catalyst” to draw attention and rally efforts to improve inner-city life. The director defended *Fort Apache*, calling it “stupid” to assume that characters in films represented all blacks or all Puerto Ricans.52 Unfortunately, like earlier films dealing with social problems, *Fort Apache* reinforced stereotypes rather than exposing urban ills.53 Despite efforts to defend the movies, both politicians and community groups in the Bronx met the film with protest. In 1980, a lawsuit to block filming was thrown out of the State Supreme Court.54 A group called “Committee against *Fort Apache*” tried to disrupt filming and called for a boycott, saying that the film depicted residents as animals who encouraged violence.55 Representative Robert Garcia of the Bronx asked, “How do you convince Congress...we can salvage the area when people across the country see only a picture of negatives, of pimps, of prostitutes?”56 The film had touched a nerve in the borough: people across the country were seeing the South Bronx as a hellish world of crime and chaos at a time when the Bronx was starting to get back on its feet.

Later, journalists and people who worked and lived in the Bronx agreed on the film’s impact on public perception of their borough, including the influence it had on policymakers. *Fort Apache* is continually mentioned. A Bronx resident who visited Los Angeles noted that people there felt that in the Bronx “everything is like *Fort Apache*.”57 A *Daily News* editorial in 1993 accused legislators who wanted to move the Yankees out of the Bronx of being affected by media imagery, calling them “political and commercial dinosaurs...ten years late, stuck in the past of *Fort Apache* and *The Warriors*.”58 Bernd Zimmerman, Director of the Bronx Borough Bureau of Planning Development, said that such films “seared images into the minds of all America.”59 The impact one film has had on the national image of the South Bronx demonstrates the power of film media. Both politicians and the general public were bitterly aware that these films affected both public perception as well as policy decisions.

In the early 1990s, there were two films made that created a more nuanced image of the South Bronx: *I Like it Like That* (1994) and *Hanging with the Homeboys* (1991). They did not have celebrity actors, and had lower attendance than mainstream movies such as *Fort Apache*, but they set a trend for future films.60 In contrast to *Fort Apache*, the two films won critical approval. Although they have been criticized for their take on gender, they dealt with serious themes such as racism and inner-city crime. At the same time, they were affectionate, funny, and playful in their views of the South Bronx. Their protagonists were black and Latino residents of the neighborhood, male and female, rather than white male outsiders.

In the tradition of Spike Lee, smaller independent movies such as *I Like it Like That* and *Hanging With the Homeboys* paved the way for films such as *Finding Forrester* (2001): a Hollywood blockbuster movie romanticizing the South Bronx. These films demonstrated that there was a market for movies showing urban areas in a different light.

*Finding Forrester* gives a quite sentimentalized depiction of the South Bronx, one that runs completely contrary to Hollywood depictions of the 1980s and early ’90s. The film tells the story of Jamal, a black teenager from the South Bronx, an extraordinarily gifted writer and athlete who meets up with the curmudgeonly writer...
William Forrester, played by Sean Connery. William Forrester, once famous, is now a writer holed up and shut off from the world in an ancient South Bronx apartment building next to Jamal's local basketball court. The plot is predictable: it is obvious from the beginning of the movie that Jamal will draw Forrester out of his shell, while Forrester helps Jamal with his writing: a classic uplifting Hollywood story. Unlike I Like it Like That or Hanging with the Homeboys, critics disliked Finding Forrester. Newsday reacted to the film with the description “old white hermit genius mentors young black writer-genius,” calling it a “strictly racism under-the-rug, feel-good formula.” The reviewer in fact recommends leaving after the first half of the movie. On a website specializing in movie reviews, Finding Forrester received a 75 on a 100-point “rotten tomato meter.”

The opening shots are a curious mix of images typical of earlier films about the Bronx and more romantic ones. The film begins with a young man rapping a capella, as he looks straight into the camera. With his voice in the background, the audience sees a montage of Bronx street scenes. There are the usual scenes of graffiti and abandoned buildings, but they are followed by those of neighborhood residents: girls laughing on the street, a father playing with his two sons, hotdog vendors, and a neighborhood barber shop. In another scene, a woman sits in church, followed by a shot of a priest with the American flag in the background. All of these shots are of black and Hispanic residents. By choosing to use these romantic images at the onset of the film, the film presents its viewers with a different Hollywood impression of the South Bronx.

The housing projects featured in the film look almost benign, with pigeons flying gracefully overhead. The scenes of the street cut to a pile of books, among them Chekhov, Joyce, and Ken Kesey, and pan to a close up of Jamal's face. He is in bed, about to get up at his mother's wake-up call to go to school.

Jamal's public high school is also idealized. Drugs, sex, and violence are nonexistent among the Bronx teens. Jamal and his friends are mostly shown playing basketball or laughing and talking undisturbed in their school lunchroom. The large school is clean and orderly. A teacher reads poetry to the attentive students, and the principal knows Jamal by name. Similar to the housing project visited by the characters of Hanging with the Homeboys, Jamal's apartment in a public housing project is clean and pleasant, and William Forrester's old building is spacious, stately, and well maintained. Jamal's brother, played by rapper Busta Rhymes, has a steady job supervising a parking lot at Yankee Stadium.

Jamal's character, played by Rob Brown, is an idealistic hero far from earlier stereotypes of black and Puerto Rican characters. Jamal's perfection is part of the film's sentimentality. Besides being insightful and an extremely intelligent, reading Mishima and writing like an accomplished author at sixteen, Jamal is quiet and introspective as well as popular at school. He seems to fit in no matter whether he is in the Bronx with his friends, talking with William Forrester, or meeting new friends later in the film, after he transfers to an exclusive private school in Manhattan.

There are only several short scenes vaguely reminiscent of Fort Apache. As Jamal walks home through his neighborhood at night, the camera slows down: an abandoned car burns in the background, and a police car, siren wailing, passes by. Jamal seems uncomfortable, but he is unharmed. In another scene, Jamal enters his building at night with a friend. He asks, “You ever met anyone famous?” His friend answers, “Nobody like that comes around here.” These short scenes are the only time the audience is reminded of the danger of the neighborhood or how it appears to outsiders.
There is an interesting inversion of earlier films, where white policemen were the protagonists and black and Puerto Rican characters were largely stereotyped as the villains: the villain in this movie is the white private school teacher who accuses Jamal of plagiarizing. Rather than portraying blacks and Puerto Ricans menacing lone white characters, as in *Fort Apache*, in *Finding Forrester* Jamal and his friends are initially frightened by the reclusive author. In an early scene, Jamal and his group of friends refer to Forrester as a ghost, and the young men are obviously fearful when they dare Jamal to sneak into Forrester’s apartment. When Forrester’s shout scares Jamal, he runs out of the apartment, and his friends join him in flight. It is a comical inversion of earlier Hollywood stereotypes: five young black men running away at top speed from an elderly white man in the dead of night on the streets of the South Bronx.

After Jamal befriends Forrester, there is a rosy, saccharine aspect to their relationship. There is a tenderness between the two characters: Jamal turns the light out in Forrester’s apt when he falls asleep and takes him home from a basketball game in Manhattan when Forrester is overwhelmed by the crowds. Scenes of Yankee stadium in old photos in Forrester’s apartment highlight the romantic past of the borough, and there is one sentimental scene when Jamal takes Forrester to Yankee Stadium at night. Jamal’s brother allows the two of them into the empty stadium, where they stand on the pitcher’s mound under the stadium lights.

When William Forrester finally decides to leave his house, eventually to come to Jamal’s rescue, a scene that tries to be warmly comic is almost painfully manipulative. As Forrester rides nonchalantly through the streets of the South Bronx on his rickety bicycle, signaling when he turns left, the audience is expected to be moved by Forrester’s return to the outside world and to root for Jamal’s rescue. In retrospect, one realizes that these are the same streets where drug dealers knifed prostitutes and crooks blatantly robbed apartments and escaped on the fire escapes on the sets of *Fort Apache*. Once shown to inspire fear, they are now being used to pull audience’s heartstrings.

It is quite clear that *Finding Forrester* presents the South Bronx differently than *Fort Apache*. *Finding Forrester* gives sentimentalized and idealistic depictions of this urban neighborhood. Its images of the South Bronx and its residents are worlds away from *Fort Apache*, which ends with a freeze frame of Murphy and his partner nabbing a Latino criminal whom they have been chasing throughout the film for brazenly robbing apartments. In *Finding Forrester*, the Bronx is a borough with a history and is shown in relationship with Manhattan, rather than in isolation. Its inhabitants are shown as working-class people with steady jobs rather than drug addicts and criminals. However, *Finding Forrester* ignores the reality of the problems that still exist in the South Bronx such as failing schools, violence, and high unemployment. In this instance, Hollywood now idealizes the same neighborhood it once condemned.

**A New Look at the Urban Landscape?**

This is not to say that films must depict urban areas in a rosy light or that only “insiders” can represent urban neighborhoods. Protests that called for banning both *Fort Apache* and *Bonfire of the Vanities* were never valid in court—and rightfully so, given our First Amendment rights. However, there is a changing trend in the way Hollywood sees cities in film, an extremely important visual media in American culture today. It may be partly because black and Hispanic filmmakers from urban neighborhoods have more of a voice in film than in the past. It is also due to the fact that across the country in the 1980s and 1990s, urban areas were gaining new life.

The relationship between the city and the suburbs has changed, along with
America’s perspective on race. Now that cities are full of the same chain stores and fast food restaurants as strip malls, cities are becoming closer to suburbs in appearance. Gentrification has made many urban areas more desirable to upper-income citizens and forced earlier residents out. At the same time, some suburbs are beginning to have the same problems with drugs and crime as urban areas; previously such issues formed a sharp distinction between city and suburb. Suburban neighborhoods may not be as culturally diverse as cities, but young people’s affinity with urban culture, particularly through hip-hop music, has given suburbanites a sense of familiarity with some elements of urban life. Although racism and segregation are still prevalent in American cities, suburbs can no longer be clearly distinguished by race as they once were. Changes in perception are reflected in film. No matter what images they create, Hollywood movies simplify real life issues. For Hollywood blockbuster films, it has been difficult to give a nuanced picture of city life. However, there has been a marked change in the way Hollywood considers cities and race in the 1990s and the year 2000.

It is important to reflect on such films and what they signify in the larger context of American culture. What does this trend in film mean for areas like the South Bronx? As the economy turns downward again, will citizens of urban neighborhoods be demonized once again? Do Americans have a different perspective on city life? How will film media react to new developments in the South Bronx? What will the effect of September 11’s tragedy have on urban areas and their image in the American media? Looking closely at films about the South Bronx reveals the complex interplay between media and reality. History and cultural attitudes exist before films are made. Yet Hollywood’s exaggerated depictions may overshadow changes taking place in the present and affect mindsets for years to come. The next several decades will be revealing in both the future for the South Bronx and how Hollywood continues to depict urban areas.
NOTES


7 Ibid. The Borough President’s office used this geographic distinction when they recognized the South Bronx as a real place.

8 Mike Davis, City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles (London: Verso, 1990), 224.


10 Pocock and Hudson, 108.


13 Elise Bright, Reviving America’s Forgotten Neighborhoods: An Investigation of Inner City Revitalization Efforts (New York: Garland Publishing, 2001), 1. Bright describes William Julius Williams’ theory of how Americans categorize the poor into the “deserving” and the “undeserving.” The latter were stereotyped as criminals, drunks, lazy, etc.

14 Gilens, 132.

15 Davis, 270.

16 Perez, 12, describes this phenomenon in particular with reference to urban Puerto Ricans.


19 Jackson, 275.

20 Davis, 270.

21 Pocock and Hudson, 101-108. See also Davis, 23, 224, and 270 for a discussion of how myths create a panic, which in turn influence public policy; and Klein, 11, 62.

22 Grogan and Proscio, 155-157. The “broken window” theory, published in 1969, was adopted by mayors such as Rudolph Giuliani in the 1990s to support his “quality of life” law enforcement policy.

23 Davis, 224. Davis gives a thorough description of how this perception of crime has led to the creation of “Fortress Cities.” Klein, 11, discusses how freeways were built in a similar fashion. And Vergara, 110-119, chronicles this phenomenon through his photos of fortress-like architecture in buildings in inner cities across the country.

This was seen in the extreme in the case of John Ahearn in the South Bronx, an artist who was forced to remove his sculptures in the South Bronx because some residents denounced them as stereotypical.


Reyes and Rubie, 107. See Reyes and Rubie for a comparison of the two films.


Lydia Yee, interview.

Building a borough, 42.


*Comeback Cities* is one example.

“They’ll Polish the Bronx Image,” *Daily News*, 4 December 1991, BW2


Flyer, Committee Against Fort Apache, Museum of Metropolitan Art Film Archives.

Perez, 13. The stereotypes of violent-tempered men and “loose” women are apparent in these scenes.


Edward Koch in Raab, 6.


Raab, 6.

This may be a case of the subconscious stereotypes described in Gilens, 150. It is also reminiscent of Ramirez-Berg’s example of social problem films “endorsing the system they set out to criticize,” 30.


Raab, 6.

Raab, 6.


REFERENCES


*Bonfire of the Vanities*. 1990. Produced and directed by Brian De Palma. 2 hr. 6 min. Warner Brothers. Videocassette.


