

Screening the L.A.P.D.:
Cinematic Representations of Policing and Discourses of Law
Enforcement in Los Angeles, 1948-2003.

by

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Ph.D. Thesis

Declaration

I, Robert Bevan, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Thesis Abstract

This thesis examines cinematic representations of the L.A.P.D. within the context of discourses of law enforcement in Los Angeles and contends that these feature films constitute a significant strand within such discourse. This contention, which is based upon the various identifiable ways in which the films engage with contemporary issues, acknowledges that the nature of such engagement is constrained by the need to produce a commercially viable fictional entertainment. In four main chronological segments, I argue that it is also influenced by the increasing ethnic and gendered diversity of film-makers, by their growing freedom to screen even the most sensitive issues and by the changing racial and spatial politics of Los Angeles.

In the 1940s and 1950s, the major studios were prepared to illustrate some disputed matters, such as wire-tapping, but represented L.A.P.D. officers as white paragons of virtue and ignored their fractious relationships with minority communities. In the aftermath of the Watts riot of 1965, racial tensions were more difficult to ignore and, under a more liberal censorship regime, film-makers—led by two independent African American directors—began to depict instances of police racism and brutality. Between the major L.A.P.D. anti-gang initiative of 1988 and the Rodney King beating of 1991, two films were released which tackled the inter-related issues of gang violence and the controversial nature of the police response. In the febrile atmosphere of the time, each found itself at the centre of local discourses of law enforcement. Then, in the wake of the King beating, Los Angeles and its police force endured the 1992 riots, the trial of O.J. Simpson and the Rampart scandal. These highly publicised events, which gave the L.A.P.D. a world-wide reputation for racism, brutality and corruption, also informed several movies in which the misdeeds of filmic policemen outstripped even the worst excesses of their real-life counterparts.

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I. Introduction

Operating in the home of the American moving-picture industry, the L.A.P.D. is one of the most-publicised police forces in the world, with a long history of dramatic representation, initially on radio but more recently, and more famously, on television and in feature films. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the power of these moving images had a significant influence on public perceptions of the force. At the peak of its prestige in the 1950s and early-1960s, a series of favourable portrayals on television and in the cinema gave powerful support to its claim to be ‘one of the finest police departments in the world’.¹ In the 1990s, its reputation was shattered by an apparently unending sequence of real-life scandals which received extensive television coverage and subsequently informed a series of increasingly unflattering cinematic representations.

The large number of police movies set in Los Angeles, coupled with the importance of the city as a major urban centre, has led scholars from a range of academic disciplines to make use of these films to illustrate their analyses of subjects such as race, spatiality and masculinity. Taking this body of work as its starting point, the primary aim of this thesis is to provide insights into previously unexplored territory by examining cinematic representations of the L.A.P.D. within the context of local discourses of law enforcement. From detailed analysis of films released over a period of fifty-five years, it contends that those films constitute a significant contributory strand within such discourse. In general, its findings support the assertion of Robert Brent Toplin that feature films have the power to

¹ Alisa Sarah Kramer, *William H. Parker and the Thin Blue Line: Politics, Public Relations and Policing in Postwar Los Angeles*, Ph.D. dissertation, The American University, 2007, p. 172.

‘stir curiosity and prompt viewers to consider significant questions.’² In particular, its researches have identified the various ways in which each film engages with contemporary issues. The nature and extent of such engagement is often brief, sometimes nuanced and always constrained by the need to produce a fictional entertainment which is commercially viable. In four main chronological segments, this thesis argues that it is also influenced by the increasing ethnic and gendered diversity of film-makers, by their growing freedom to engage with the issues of the day and by the changing racial and spatial politics of Los Angeles.

The films considered in this thesis contribute to a broad spectrum of discourses of law enforcement through their representations of issues as wide-ranging as police corruption, constitutional safeguards of privacy, L.A.P.D. shooting policy, the psychological health of police officers and the complexity of the California justice system. However, throughout the period studied, recurring tensions between a predominantly white police force and the minority communities of Los Angeles have also ensured a prominent position in local discourses of law enforcement for racial issues, especially in 1965 and 1992 when these tensions erupted in major civil disturbances. African American and Latino residents have consistently accused the police of racism and brutality, while the markedly higher rates of crime in inner-city areas have led more than one L.A.P.D. Chief to associate race with criminality. The police presence in minority areas has often been condemned as heavy-handed but occasionally criticised for its inadequacy, accompanied by the allegation that crime is only taken seriously when white residents are its victims. Although absent

² Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), p.1.

from cinema screens until the 1970s, the prominence of these racial issues in real life has been matched by their subsequent influence upon cinematic representations of policing.

Nothing illustrates the changing relationship between cinematic representation and contemporary discourses of law enforcement more clearly than the very different responses of the film industry to two infamous examples of police brutality, separated in time by almost forty years. In 1991, the video-taped beating of Rodney King was screened repeatedly on local and national television and provided shocking images which validated the long-standing accusations of police brutality made by the minority communities of Los Angeles. The incident was also the catalyst for a chain of events which included condemnation of the L.A.P.D. as brutal racists by an independent commission, the loss of the political independence which successive Chiefs had cherished for many years and, immediately after the officers involved were found not guilty of criminal charges, four days of the most destructive civil disturbances in American history. Less than two years later, Spike Lee set the original video-tape of the King beating against the background of a burning Stars and Stripes in the opening sequence of *Malcolm X* (1992).³ Verbal or visual references to this watershed event subsequently appeared in a number of other films, including *Natural Born Killers* (1994), *Virtuosity* (1995), *Strange Days* (1995), *American History X* (1998), *Three Kings* (1999), *Training Day* (2001) and *Dark Blue* (2002).

Just like the King beating, the Bloody Christmas incident of 1951, in which seven Mexican American suspects were brutally beaten by a large number of L.A.P.D. officers,

³ Within this thesis, initial reference to a film always comprises *title* (year of United States release). Subsequent references are normally *title* only. Although the title of a film is often accompanied by the name of its director, the collaborative nature of film production is recognised and, where appropriate, the contribution of script-writer or producer is acknowledged. Full details of each film mentioned can be found in References, Filmography, pp. 325-29.

resulted in a torrent of adverse publicity and in criminal trials for several of the officers involved. However, as Edward Escobar has pointed out, in the early 1950s, the white power-brokers of Los Angeles, a group including both political leaders and ‘non-governmental elites’, favoured an aggressive approach to policing as the most likely route to a crime-free city. Their support for L.A.P.D. Chief William H. Parker (1950-1966) ensured that the investigations of Bloody Christmas were limited to the incident itself and to its narrow disciplinary consequences. Parker subsequently devoted substantial public relations resources to reinforce the image of his force as ‘the thin blue line’ which stood between white home-owners and the twin evils of organised crime and criminally-inclined racial minorities.⁴ Part of this effort was directed towards both supporting and controlling Jack Webb’s *Dragnet* franchise, a series of favourable portrayals of the L.A.P.D. on radio and television and in the cinema. Although, in the Fifties, the exploits of L.A.P.D. officers were dramatised in many films, none of these representations contained any significant reference to the city’s Mexican American and African American populations and Bloody Christmas was completely ignored. Four decades would elapse before *L.A. Confidential* (1997) provided its first filmic representation, a dramatic reconstruction incorporating a cinematic device which gave immediacy to the challenges faced by his fictional Chief of Police. The accidental presence in the police station of a journalist and his photographer results in pictures of the beating being splashed across the front page of the next day’s newspaper, creating a media sensation which, to a Nineties audience, was recognisable as a

⁴ Edward J. Escobar, ‘Bloody Christmas and the Irony of Police Professionalism: The Los Angeles Police Department, Mexican Americans, and Police Reform in the 1950s’, *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 72, no. 2 (May 2003), pp. 176-77.

fictional Fifties equivalent of the furore which had surrounded the Rodney King videotape.⁵ In his retrospective account of an era when contemporary representations of the L.A.P.D. had mostly involved honest white cops battling white criminals, director Curtis Hanson was able to exploit a cinematic environment in which censorship had become far less stringent, where the presence of African Americans and Latinos, as directors, stars and supporting actors, had become commonplace and where the misconduct of his filmic police officers resonated with an audience which had experienced saturation media-coverage of the transgressions of the L.A.P.D. His counterparts in the Fifties had been white men, producing films which were aimed at white audiences and which were constrained, not only by a rigorous censorship regime, but by the innate conservatism of the Hollywood studio system and of a society in which the anti-communist ‘inquisition’ was still evident. At a time when the L.A.P.D. enjoyed the solid support of the dominant white population of the city, and when the rhetoric of successive Chiefs of Police had categorised Mexican Americans as criminals rather than as victims, there was no place in filmic discourse for *Bloody Christmas*.⁶

Los Angeles: Civic Structures, Spatiality and Race

As a city of global significance, Los Angeles has attracted the attentions of scholars working in a range of disciplines, including geography, architecture, town planning, social

⁵ Hanson’s film was an adaptation of James Ellroy’s novel, *L.A. Confidential* (New York: The Mysterious Press, 1990), which was published well before the King beating took place. Ellroy’s literary representation of *Bloody Christmas* did not suggest any immediate media exposure.

⁶ Edward J. Escobar, *Race, Police and the Making of a Political Identity: Mexican Americans and the Los Angeles Police Department, 1900-1945* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 286-87.

science, film studies and history. Nevertheless, it remains a difficult place to define, either in metaphorical or concrete terms. According to Kathryn Bigelow, Hollywood director and local resident: ‘it’s not a city. There is no centre. And in its lack of identity it has a kind of poly-identity: it’s whatever you project onto it, a faceless place that harbors a multitude of identities, all blurred into one.’⁷ The city’s well-documented physical fragmentation and discontinuity has led many sociologists and historians to label it as postmodern, while its lack of a clearly defined city-centre, its dependence upon the automobile and the building of its iconic freeway network inspired Reyner Banham to describe it as a place ‘where mobility outweighs monumentality’.⁸ More prosaically, the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area is an urban sprawl which, in 2011, is home to more than fifteen million people, nine million of whom live in Los Angeles County, with the remainder divided between the four neighbouring counties of Ventura, San Bernadino, Riverside and Orange. Within this county structure are more than one hundred and thirty separate cities, eighty-eight of which are within Los Angeles County, and one of which is the city whose abbreviated name is commonly used as a synecdoche for itself and for its surrounding area.⁹ The City of Los Angeles has a population of almost four million people and occupies

⁷ Andrew Hulktrans, ‘Interview with Katherine Bigelow’, *Artforum*, November, 1995, p. 80.

⁸ Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 5. See also the works of Roger Keil, Allen J. Scott and Edward Soja, Mike Davis, Liam Kennedy and David E. James referenced throughout this thesis.

⁹ Since the operations of the L.A.P.D. are confined to the City of Los Angeles, the use of ‘Los Angeles’ within this thesis will normally relate to that individual city. See Appendix, Map 1, p. 320.

an area large enough to accommodate the aggregate space of Boston, Cleveland, Manhattan, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, San Francisco and St. Louis.¹⁰

David E. James has identified the spatial determinants which underlie this fragmented urban pattern, including the hydrological engineering which underpinned the original real estate boom of the 1920s and the development of the automobile which enabled the creation of the freeway network.¹¹ These advances in technology have been accompanied by continuing patterns of both national and international immigration, resulting in a large population of African Americans and significant concentrations of residents who originate from Mexico, Central America, Japan, Korea and the Middle East.¹² As a result, greater Los Angeles has become one of the most cosmopolitan urban areas in America and one in which racial and spatial politics are inextricably linked. Perhaps the most significant factor in the development of this extraordinary collection of cities was the desire of affluent white communities to use incorporation as a means of securing control of zoning and planning in order to protect home values and minimise taxation. Following the success of the ‘Lakewood plan’ in 1954, this approach became increasingly popular and Mike Davis argues that this use of civic politics and planning by the white middle class to separate themselves from the urban poor, and especially from the African American and Hispanic populations, has created a form of ‘spatial apartheid’. Davis supports his argument by citing statistics from 1980 which show that, while the

¹⁰ Roger Keil, *Los Angeles: Globalization, Urbanization and Social Struggles* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), p. xvii. See Appendix, Map 2, p. 321.

¹¹ David. E James, ‘Towards a Geo-Cinematic Hermeneutics: Representations of Los Angeles in Non-Industrial Cinema—*Killer Of Sheep* and *Water And Power*’, *Wide Angle*, vol. 20 no. 3 (1 July 1998), pp. 27-28.

¹² Roger Waldinger and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, ‘The Making of a Successful Metropolis’, in Roger Waldinger, and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, eds., *Ethnic Los Angeles* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996), p. 8.

African American population of Los Angeles County was thirteen percent of the total, in fifty-three of its eighty-eight cities it amounted to less than one percent.¹³

In Los Angeles itself, African Americans have traditionally accounted for an overwhelming proportion of the population in South Central and Watts while, for many years, Latinos of Mexican origin have been the dominant ethnic group in East Los Angeles. In an urban area thus characterised by racial and ethnic segregation, the most striking spatial distinction remains what Eric Avila termed ‘Chocolate Cities and Vanilla Suburbs’, a phenomenon which accelerated as a consequence of ‘white flight’ in the 1950s and 1960s and which resulted in white populations dominating the outlying dormitory communities, leaving minority communities concentrated in inner city areas.¹⁴ Although, at the end of World War II, whites had accounted for approximately eighty percent of the population of the city, the 2000 census for Los Angeles showed Latinos at forty-seven percent to be the largest segment of a population of minorities, well ahead of whites at thirty percent, while African Americans at eleven percent narrowly outnumbered the nine percent of Asian origin.¹⁵ This demographic transformation was accompanied by substantial changes in the economic infrastructure of the region. From the 1940s to the 1970s, as the economy of Southern California benefited from huge investments in roads and housing, from significant population growth and from federal spending in support of America’s Pacific wars, Los Angeles became an important centre of manufacturing industry, particularly in defence and

¹³ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Vintage Books, 1990), pp. 166-68, 230.

¹⁴ Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004). The phrase quoted, used by Avila as a chapter-title, was taken from a popular song, ‘Chocolate City’, released by Parliament in 1975.

¹⁵ City of Los Angeles Census 2000, Race and Ethnicity Composition found at <<http://cityplanning.lacity.org/dru/C2K/Cwd/PgCwd.cfm?grfxname=REHist>> on 12 June 2010. See Appendix, Maps 3 and 4, p. 322, for racial demographics in 1960 and 1990.

aerospace. By the 1990s it had been transformed into a post-industrial ‘world city’, with an economy increasingly dependent upon foreign investment and in which employment had become polarised between a relatively small number of highly-paid technical positions and a huge mass of unskilled jobs in services, many of which were filled by new immigrants. Processes of spatial formation, such as inner city de-industrialisation and the growth of ‘edge cities’ as the homes of the newer industries, had especially devastating implications for the economy of the traditional African American area of South Central Los Angeles.¹⁶

Los Angeles is not only the home of the American film industry but, as Mark Shiel notes, its use as the setting for many feature films reflects its status as a location which allows constant re-exploration. While arguing that film is ‘a peculiarly spatial form of culture’, with ‘a special potential to illuminate the lived spaces of the city and urban culture’, Shiel acknowledges that any major American city is ‘a particularly dynamic space of representational interest’. Nevertheless, he suggests that, for many commentators, Los Angeles represents ‘the paradigmatic city space, urban society and cultural environment’ of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. He also notes that the home of Hollywood and cinema is also ‘a tense and often violent combination of First and Third World realities in one (albeit highly segregated) space.’¹⁷ The films within this thesis demonstrate that, as portrayed in the cinema, the spatiality of Los Angeles is often represented from a racial

¹⁶ Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), p. 4. Garreau coined the phrase ‘edge city’ to describe the consequences of the movement of the means of wealth-creation from the inner city to suburban areas. For discussions of Los Angeles as a post-industrial, post-modern, global city see Allen J. Scott, and Edward W. Soja (eds.), *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996); Keil, Los Angeles.

¹⁷ Mark Shiel, ‘Cinema and the City in History and Theory’, in Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (eds.), *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), pp. 1, 5-7.

perspective, whether as the safe spaces of the entirely white city represented in the films of the Forties and Fifties or as the dangerous, crime-ridden inner city ghettos often portrayed by film-makers of the Seventies and beyond.

Law Enforcement

The complex civic structure of the region means that the task of law enforcement has come to be conducted through a jigsaw puzzle of more than fifty different agencies. The L.A.P.D., which is the primary subject of this thesis, currently employs around nine thousand sworn officers and is responsible for law enforcement within Los Angeles. The Sheriffs of the five counties command independent forces which, collectively, outnumber the L.A.P.D. and which keep the peace within a large number of small cities and any remaining unincorporated areas. Many larger or more affluent cities, such as Long Beach, Inglewood, Santa Monica and Beverly Hills, operate their own independent police forces, although their senior officers are often recruited from the L.A.P.D. The other main uniformed force which is highly visible in Los Angeles is the California Highway Patrol (C.H.P.) which is responsible for enforcing motoring laws on the freeway network.

In Los Angeles, as in America as a whole, police officers almost invariably carry fire-arms and are distinguished from most other civic agencies by the right to use coercive force in pursuit of their duties, a power which may extend as far as the lawful killing of other citizens. The role, conduct and governance of its police forces constitute important topics of American civil discourse and political control of such an important agency is often a source of local tension. Judicial scholar Samuel Walker points out that, in order to be

truly professional, a police force needs independence from excessive political interference but also notes that a force which has too much independence can become isolated and alienated from the community.¹⁸ The power of Walker's insight can be confirmed by the history of Los Angeles where the Chief of Police enjoyed civil service tenure from 1937 until 1992. The endurance of this status, well beyond its demise in other major American cities, and the political freedom which it bestowed, is a significant factor in the history of the L.A.P.D. and thus central to an understanding of the history of Los Angeles, where clashes between the city's predominantly white police force and its minority communities have been at the heart of many controversial incidents, including two of America's most destructive racial disturbances and the most widely-televised criminal trial in history.

This troubled history can also be traced to the consequences for policing of two aspects of the spatiality of Los Angeles: the size of its territory and its particular blend of racial and spatial politics. In response to the challenge of providing effective policing across such a large area, the modern L.A.P.D. has pursued a strategy based upon what Mike Davis has described as 'pathbreaking substitutions of technological capital for patrol manpower'.¹⁹ Substantial investments in transportation—motor-cycles, patrol cars and, especially in the aftermath of Watts, a substantial fleet of helicopters—and in state-of-the-art communications networks, have allowed the L.A.P.D. to operate a highly mobile force at a much lower ratio of police to population than other American police forces.²⁰ However, this emphasis on operational efficiency has limited the opportunities for regular interaction between officers and the communities which they serve. In the 'spatial apartheid' of Los

¹⁸ Samuel Walker, *The Police in America: An Introduction* (New York and London: McGraw Hill, 1999), p. 272.

¹⁹ Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 251.

²⁰ Joe Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve: The LAPD's Century of War in the City of Dreams* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), p.13.

Angeles, this approach to policing by a force which, until the Nineties, remained predominantly white and which had traditionally seen itself as an agency of the white electorate underlies the perception, commonly voiced by minority communities, of the L.A.P.D. as an ‘an army of occupation’. In 1991, this perception was re-emphasised when it became clear that more than eighty percent of L.A.P.D. officers lived outside Los Angeles in predominantly white suburbs, with an especially high concentration in Simi Valley, the small town in Ventura County which came to the attention of the world as the location of the criminal trial of the officers involved in the beating of Rodney King.²¹

The Significance of Cinema

Popular culture in America has played a well-identified role in informing the population, initially through newspapers and magazines and, since the 1920s, through radio broadcasts. In the second half of the twentieth century, the written and the spoken word were largely supplanted by the moving pictures of films and television as the most common means through which the public gains information about the past as well as the present.²² The increasing significance of cinema as a medium of public information is reflected in its changing legal status throughout this period. In its *Mutual v. Ohio* judgement of 1915, the

²¹ Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), p. 273.

²² Throughout the period studied, not only did television news become an increasingly-important means of influencing public opinion but television programming included many Los Angeles-based police dramas. Although the significance of these televised representations of the L.A.P.D. is acknowledged, the confines of this thesis are judged to be inadequate to allow serious consideration of such a large number of programmes, produced to meet the demands of a different medium.

Supreme Court denied movies the free speech protection of the First Amendment and ruled that, as ‘a business ... originated and conducted for profit’, they played no part in educating the general public. However, in 1952, when considering the *Miracle* case, the Court recognised the error of its earlier judgement and ruled that ‘motion pictures were a significant medium for the communication of ideas’, an opinion given increased credibility by the various governments and pressure groups who have sought to censor feature films, and by the politicians who have attempted to adopt them for their own purposes.²³ For example, Pete Wilson, the Republican Governor of California from 1991 to 1999, attempted to link his own conservative message on welfare and education with John Singleton’s *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), a movie which emphasised the importance of fathers in the African American community.²⁴

In the second half of the twentieth century, the business of making feature films changed significantly as a result of structural developments in the industry and a major change in its system of regulation. Since the late-1920s, both production and distribution had been dominated by the studio system, described by Barry Langford as a combination of ‘contract artists ... studio backlots, standing sets, annual release “slates” and vertically integrated corporate organisations’.²⁵ In 1930, in response to increasingly aggressive external criticism of movie-content, the industry introduced its own system of self-regulation in the form of the Production Code. From 1934 onwards, enforcement of this

²³ Gerald Mast (ed.), *The Movies in Our Midst: Documents in the Cultural History of Film in America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 617, quoting from *Mutual v. Ohio*, 236 U.S. 230 (1916) and *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson*, 343 U.S. 495 (1952).

²⁴ Norman K. Denzin, *Reading Race: Hollywood and the Cinema of Racial Violence* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), p. 176.

²⁵ Barry Langford, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. ix

regime was entrusted to the newly established Production Code Administration which, as David Cook argues, attempted to constrain ‘the showing or mentioning of almost everything germane to the situation of normal human adults’.²⁶ Although, in the 1940s and 1950s, the restrictive nature of this regime was reinforced by Hollywood’s fear of the anti-communist black-list, the industry was about to enter a period of change which would sweep away both its traditional structures and the mechanisms which controlled the content of its products.

In 1948, the *Paramount* decision, in which the United States Supreme Court ordered ownership of the means of production to be separated from the channels of distribution, marked the first step in the destabilisation of the studio system.²⁷ The status quo was further undermined by the drastic reduction in cinema attendances which coincided with the linked phenomena of the rapid growth of television audiences and the migration of millions of Americans to the suburbs. Ticket sales, which peaked at ninety million per week in 1946, plummeted to sixty million in 1950 and would decline further to forty million in 1960.²⁸ As Steve Neale has pointed out, this new trading environment made a business model which was based upon fixed levels of staffing much less attractive and, by 1961, the studio system was effectively over. In its place, semi-independent production companies, often created by a director or a star but usually still dependent upon one of the major studios for production facilities, employed flexible associations of artists, financiers and technical personnel on a film-by-film basis.²⁹ In the words of British film critic

²⁶ David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), p. 237.

²⁷ *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.*, 334 US 131 (1948).

²⁸ Peter Lev, *Transforming the Screen 1950-59* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2003), p. 7.

²⁹ Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 243.

Alexander Walker, the industry had changed ‘from studios who owned stars, to stars who owned pictures’.³⁰

These structural developments were accompanied by a major change in the official and unofficial mechanisms that controlled the products of the industry. Throughout the 1950s, the combined effect of a series of court rulings which, in the wake of the *Miracle* decision, guaranteed films ‘full freedom of expression’, and of a significant increase in independent productions, made the Production Code increasingly difficult to enforce. The influence of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy declined substantially after his censure by the United States Senate in 1954 and, when Dalton Trumbo was given writer’s screen-credit for *Spartacus* (1960), it became clear that the power of the black-list was waning.³¹ The 1960s, which saw major changes to American society through the Civil Rights movement, the sexual revolution, the Women’s movement, the Gay Liberation movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement, also saw a significant change in movie censorship. By 1968, the now-ineffectual Production Code had been replaced by the M.P.A.A. rating system, an approach based upon age-appropriate classification rather than proscription.

Through the 1960s and 1970s, the ‘freelance’ approach rapidly became the dominant mode of production and Neale estimates that, by 1983, less than one third of Hollywood movies were traditional ‘in-house’ productions.³² By that date, the industry was producing far fewer films and its increased dependence upon ‘block-busters’ had resulted in a sharp rise in production costs and much larger advertising budgets. As both the risks and rewards associated with movie production increased, advances in technology made fresh synergies available between movies, consumer electronics and other broadcast media. As a

³⁰ Alexander Walker, quoted in Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, p. 427.

³¹ Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, pp. 428, 383.

³² Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, pp. 242-44.

result, the process of conglomeration, which had begun in the 1960s with the purchase of Universal Artists by MCA Inc. and of Paramount by Gulf and Western, gained new impetus.³³ By the end of the twentieth century film production was financed by a complex mix of industrial conglomerates and independent producers whose output was subject to a relatively light system of regulation. Significantly, the cultural diversity of film directors had also increased and a profession which, in the 1940s and 1950s, had been dominated by white men, by the 1990s was increasingly influenced by African Americans, Latinos and women.

Hollywood movies are designed to maximise box-office returns by attracting mass audiences and, as Philippa Gates has argued, are thus normally associated with conventional contemporary views of the world.³⁴ As Robert Ray has identified, mainstream film-makers tend to design their products around a 'thematic paradigm' which reflects 'an industry-wide consensus reflecting commercially acceptable film-making'.³⁵ From time to time, this conformist view of the world has been disrupted by independent voices, either employing an unconventional approach or illustrating an issue which mainstream cinema has previously ignored or obfuscated. Such voices have often been non-white, with the most obvious examples provided by Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), which inspired the 'Blaxploitation' films of the Seventies, and Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989), which stimulated a resurgence of black cinema in the early

³³ Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, pp. 857-59.

³⁴ Philippa Gates, *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 6.

³⁵ Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 51.

Nineties.³⁶ However, box-office success requires that films not only entertain but also resonate with contemporary sensibilities and, as a result, coincide with audience interests and expectations. Any film which meets these criteria will thus have the potential both to reflect the views of its audience and to create the possibility of influencing those views, either through what is featured on screen or through what is excluded. Exclusions may arise from the demands of a disciplined dramatic structure or from attempts to constrain production costs but may also be the result of deliberate policy, as in the absence of racial minorities from many films of the Forties and Fifties.

Movies featuring the police are extremely popular and much of their entertainment value is derived from action-oriented portrayals of crime-fighting, which often allow the inclusion of large helpings of sex and violence and which are generally focused upon the work of detectives. Understandably, the more mundane tasks of crime prevention, peace-keeping and problem-solving which, in real life, account for an overwhelming majority of police time, are much less likely to appear on the screen. Samuel Walker argues that the appeal of this approach to the cinema audience is matched by its appeal to the police, since any boost to their image as crime-fighters provides a means of emphasising their professional expertise and shows them in conflict with a segment of society which has few natural supporters. However, he also describes this cinematic focus on detective work as unfortunate, suggesting that it creates unrealistic public expectations and prevents intelligent evaluation of crime and policing.³⁷ Nicole Rafter has also identified the limitations of crime films, which she credits with the ability to ‘shape social thoughts about crime and its players’ but also criticises for their tendency to conclude with the triumph of

³⁶ Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image on Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), pp. 86, 146.

³⁷ Walker, *The Police in America*, pp. 5, 10, 272.

law and order. In her words, they first ‘show the reality which we fear’ and then ‘provide the fantasy of overcoming’.³⁸ Despite these shortcomings, which are consequences of the cinematic imperative to entertain, the films discussed within this thesis provide evidence to support the position of Philippa Gates, who has argued that crime films not only ‘process society’s fears about crime’ but also ‘articulate debates about law enforcement and justice’.³⁹ However, of the thirteen films selected for detailed analysis, although at least ten fit comfortably within the broad genre of crime films, only six are detective stories, with police presence in the remaining seven films dominated by officers in uniform. In cinematic representations of policing in Los Angeles, as in real life, it is the white, uniformed officer—‘the man’—who has most frequently personified the role of the L.A.P.D. within the racial and spatial politics of the city and has thus been a consistently contentious figure within local discourses of law enforcement.

Methodology and Structure

Although research for this thesis has encompassed a wide range of inter-related subjects, its central arguments derive from the intersection of two strands of enquiry. An extensive reading of secondary resources, dealing with the modern history of Los Angeles and its police force, identified the issues which have figured most prominently in local discourses of law enforcement. Viewing of more than fifty movies, released over a period of fifty-five years and featuring L.A.P.D. officers, allowed the selection of a sub-set of films, chosen for their power to illustrate the various ways in which a popular entertainment

³⁸ Nicole Rafter, *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 3, 7, 8, 12.

³⁹ Gates, *Detecting Men*, p. 3.

can contribute to such discourse through its engagement with contemporary issues. Each film was then subjected to detailed analysis designed to identify the nature and extent of such engagement. References to topical issues are mostly to be found within the narrative, sometimes in the form of documentary footage, such as the opening scenes of *Bush Mama* or *Dark Blue*, and sometimes as dramatised reconstructions of history, such as Bloody Christmas in *L.A. Confidential*. More frequently, they are embodied within representations of fictional events which carry distinct reminders of real-life issues, such as the Grand Jury scenes in *Dragnet* (1954), in which Joe Friday echoes Chief Parker's arguments in favour of legalising wire-taps. However, non-narrative references, such as the oppressive sounds of helicopters and sirens in *Boyz N the Hood* and the evocation of the 1992 riots by the *mise-en-scène* of *Strange Days*, are also plentiful. Each reference identified was then further pursued through a detailed examination of contemporary newspapers and magazines for articles dealing with the film itself or with the law-enforcement issues to which it referred. Recognising race as a highly contested issue within the modern history of Los Angeles and noting the regularity with which the L.A.P.D. itself has been the focal point of such contestation, the range of opinions on a particular subject was, wherever possible, further illuminated by identifying any differences of emphasis between mainstream publications and those under African American or Latino ownership.

The chapters which follow deal with four chronological periods—1945 to 1965, 1966 to 1987, 1988 to 1991 and 1992 to 2003—which are punctuated by significant moments in the history of the policing of Los Angeles: the Watts Riot of 1965, the launch in 1988 of Operation Hammer, a major anti-gang initiative, and the Rodney King beating of 1991. These divisions also align fairly well with significant changes in American society and culture, in the demographic and spatial composition of Los Angeles, in the leadership,

political strength and reputation of the L.A.P.D. and, importantly, in the increasing ethnic and gendered diversity of film-makers and in their growing freedom to express their points of view. Since more than one hundred Los Angeles-based police movies have been released during this period, a selective approach has been necessary. Although some of these movies devote relatively small amounts of screen time to police officers, each offers insights into issues of law-enforcement which were of public concern at the time of its production.

The availability of suitable films has varied tremendously throughout the fifty-five years covered by this study. The 1960s, a decade in which police movies in general suffered a slump in popularity, is practically devoid of cinematic representations of the L.A.P.D., while in the 1980s, the 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first century, the number of police movies set in Los Angeles increased substantially. As a result, a number of films from this period have been excluded from the scope of this thesis. These include iconic productions, such as Richard Donner's *Lethal Weapon* (1987), Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down* (1993) and Michael Mann's *Heat* (1995), which are more notable for their widely varying constructions of white masculinity than for their engagement with issues of law enforcement. It was also decided not to discuss four films made in the Nineties, each of which portrays aspects of the Latino community— *American Me* (1992), *Blood In, Blood Out* (1993), *Mi Vida Loca* (1993) and *Mi Familia* (1995). Although these films offer a variety of insights into the challenges faced by Latinos in the rapidly changing racial and spatial history of Los Angeles and also illustrate the influence of gang culture in East Los Angeles, collectively, they devote relatively small amounts of screen time to representations of L.A.P.D. officers.

Chapter II, 'From World War II to Watts', examines a period which roughly coincides with the appointment of William Parker as Chief of Police in 1950 and his death

in 1966. Widely acknowledged as the founding father of the modern L.A.P.D., Parker established a model of policing which brought an end to years of corruption and, in its aggressive approach to tackling crime in the inner city, reflected the racial and spatial realities of a predominantly white Los Angeles. Throughout these years, while film-making in America was dominated by the studio system and the Production Code, most cinematic representations of policing took the form of the police procedural, a sub-genre of the crime film which underlined the dedicated professionalism of the police in their systematic pursuit of criminals. In this chapter, I examine Alfred Werker's *He Walked By Night* (1948) in which the police use modern techniques to pursue a psychotic killer and Jack Webb's *Dragnet* (1954) which showcased the L.A.P.D.'s battle against organised crime. In keeping with other contemporary representations of police officers, these films were made by white men and targeted at white audiences and thus completely ignored the long-standing tensions between the L.A.P.D. and the minority communities of Los Angeles which would eventually explode in the Watts Riot of 1965. Despite the glaring absence of this increasingly important issue, the films studied managed to engage with other significant issues of contemporary concern and, in the case of *Dragnet*, offered a public platform for Chief Parker's views on several controversial issues.

Chapter III, 'S.W.A.T., C.R.A.S.H', explores the years between Parker's death and the end of the Seventies, when the long-standing para-military disposition of the L.A.P.D. was accentuated by organisational changes and by increased investment in helicopters, and when a wide range of dissenting groups, particularly the increasingly radical black community, actively opposed its style of policing. Its leadership rested largely in the hands of two long-serving Chiefs, both of whom had come to prominence as Parker's protégés. Ed Davis (1968-76) and Daryl Gates (1978-1992) not only enjoyed the same political

independence as their mentor but also commanded a force which continued to be dominated by white officers, a recipe for conflict in a city increasingly populated by people of colour and challenged by social and economic problems. As the social and cultural landscape of the United States was transformed, so censorship in the cinema became far less rigorous, resulting in representation of a wider range of police behaviours and a significant increase in the visibility of racial minorities on screen. In this chapter, I examine a number of films which, collectively, transformed the cinematic representation of the policing of Los Angeles. Two independently-produced African American movies, *Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1976), portrayed the L.A.P.D. as brutal racists and as oppressors of the black community. Hollywood's representations of policing were also transformed by *The New Centurions* (1971) and *The Choirboys* (1977), films based upon the writings of Joseph Wambaugh which provided 'warts and all' portrayals of Los Angeles police officers and engaged directly with the challenges faced by a predominantly white L.A.P.D. in policing the inner city. A screen adaptation of another Wambaugh book, *The Onion Field* (1979), provided insights into the psychological challenges faced by traumatised police officers and the deficiencies of the L.A.P.D. in recognising and treating such symptoms.

Chapter IV, 'C.R.A.S.H., Hammer', covers Los Angeles in the Eighties, a decade in which waves of immigration transformed a once-overwhelmingly white city into a multi-racial metropolis and the combined effects of a domestic recession and increasing global competition devastated traditional manufacturing industries. As a consequence, the post-industrial wastelands of the inner city were dominated by unemployment, by the advent of crack cocaine and by a dramatic surge in levels of gang violence. In 1988, the L.A.P.D. responded with Operation Hammer, a series of anti-gang sweeps which flooded the streets

of South Central Los Angeles with police officers and led to thousands of arrests. Two films, released in the years between Operation Hammer and the Rodney King beating and set largely in African American and Latino areas of Los Angeles, engaged separately with the issues surrounding gang-culture and the dilemma of minority communities, who were forced to choose between their fear of gang violence and their long-standing perception of the L.A.P.D. as an army of occupation. Dennis Hopper's *Colors* (1988) marks the first cinematic representation of conflict between white police officers and African American and Latino street-gangs and illustrates the apparently intractable obstacles faced by the L.A.P.D. and the limitations of their traditional aggressive approach. John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* is an African American coming-of-age film, set in South Central Los Angeles which, although completed before the Rodney King beating, managed both to anticipate and to illustrate many of the criticisms of the L.A.P.D. made by the independent commission set up to investigate that pivotal event. Through serendipity, each film was released at a time when its own particular subject matter was dominating civil discourse in Los Angeles and each, in its own right, became a source of further controversy.

Chapter V, 'Bad Cops', deals with the filmic implications of the highly publicised incidents of the 1990s which, in the aftermath of the King beating, left the L.A.P.D. with a world-wide reputation for racism, brutality and corruption. In 1992, its failure to respond effectively to the rioting which followed the acquittal of the officers charged with assaulting Rodney King was followed by the removal of the cherished independence of the Chief of Police and the forced retirement of long-serving Chief Gates, the final link to Chief Parker. For the remainder of the century, the L.A.P.D. was led by two African Americans, Willie Williams (1992-1997) and Bernard Parks (1997-2002), each of whom presided over notable further public embarrassments. The trial of O.J. Simpson in 1995

exposed the L.A.P.D. to charges of incompetence and racism, while the Rampart Scandal revealed a pattern of police corruption which, in January 2001, resulted in the humiliating imposition of Federal Oversight. By the end of the century the impact of this series of real-life disasters was discernible in a number of Hollywood movies in which a diverse group of film-makers provided a major change in the representation of contemporary policing and a revisionist approach to its prior history. Many of these films openly confronted the issues of racism, brutality and corruption which had combined to undermine the credibility of policing in the city and which had come to dominate discourses of law-enforcement at the turn of the century. The King beating and the riots of 1992 are thematic presences in Kathryn Bigelow's *Strange Days* while Ron Shelton's *Dark Blue*, set in the final days of the Simi Valley trial, is the only feature film so far to feature a dramatic reconstruction of those disturbances. Antoine Fuqua's *Training Day* is overtly linked to the Rampart scandal and explores the boundaries between a police officer's desire to bring criminals to justice and his need to obey the law. These films are complemented by *L.A. Confidential*, a revisionist interpretation of the policing of Los Angeles in the Fifties which is clearly informed by the events of the early Nineties.

Primary and Secondary Research Resources

Although the foundation of this thesis is a detailed analysis of the films themselves, it is also based upon a wide range of primary research resources. Materials from the Warner Brothers Archive at the University of Southern California (U.S.C.) and from the Special Collections section of the Margaret Herrick Library have provided valuable insights into negotiations and correspondence surrounding the production of films of the 1940s and

1950s. Joseph Wambaugh, ex-L.A.P.D. officer, best-selling novelist and film-producer, adaptations of whose written works feature prominently in Chapter III, has been an informative correspondent. Primary research materials, regarding both the reception of the films and contemporary discourses of law enforcement, have been obtained from a variety of trade journals, newspapers, magazines and electronic resources. Although local publications provide most of this information, appropriate attention has also been paid to major newspapers in other American cities and to nationally distributed magazines and journals, reflecting the national significance of events in Los Angeles. This research relies heavily upon publications with predominantly white readerships, such as the *Los Angeles Times*, but also differs from most published works on this subject in its substantial use of African American and, to a lesser extent, Latino publications.

Of necessity, the secondary research involved in producing this thesis has required consideration of a wide range of scholarly books and articles. Los Angeles itself has been the subject of many publications across several disciplines, including previously referenced works on its architecture and urban geography by Banham, Scott and Soja and Keil. Its ethnic and racial complexity has been the subject of detailed analysis by Roger Waldinger and Mehdi Bozorghmehr, while Raphael J. Sonesheim has examined the changing impact of its racial composition upon local politics.⁴⁰ The role of the police as an agency of social control in Los Angeles is the subject of an extensive critique in Mike Davis' *City of Quartz*, a seminal work, published in 1990 and quoted extensively in most subsequent studies of the city. The L.A.P.D. also features prominently in many general studies of North American policing, including the works of Samuel Walker and Jerome Skolnick, and has its own,

⁴⁰ Waldinger and Bozorghmehr (eds.), *Ethnic Los Angeles*; Raphael J. Sonesheim, *Politics in Black and White: Race and Power in Los Angeles* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

dedicated body of literature, which grew significantly after the Rodney King affair. Both Joe Domanick and Lou Cannon have published popular histories of the force, while Gerald Woods has critiqued the consequences of police professionalisation and Steven Kelly Herbert has studied the links between police behaviour and the particular spatiality of Los Angeles. Janice Appier has described the changing role of women within the L.A.P.D. while Renford Reese has examined the leadership styles of its Chiefs, from William Parker onwards. The significance of Parker is the subject of a Ph.D. dissertation by Alisa Kramer and is also covered extensively in journalist John Buntin's portrayal of Los Angeles in the Forties, Fifties and Sixties from the opposing perspectives of the Chief of Police and of Mickey Cohen, the city's most notorious gangster.⁴¹

Many scholars have chosen to illustrate their points of view through references to films set within Los Angeles. Eric Avila has explored the cinematic reconstruction of urban life in the Forties, Fifties and Sixties, both Liam Kennedy and Norman Klein have commented upon representations of the city in films of the Eighties and Nineties, while Kenneth James Fox has devoted his Ph.D. thesis to a study of 'identity and mobility' in Los Angeles-based films from *Chinatown* (1974) onwards. Cinematic versions of the African American experience in Los Angeles, which often involve conflict between the L.A.P.D.

⁴¹ Walker, *The Police in America*; Janes H. Skolnick and James J. Fyfe, *Above the Law: Police and the Excessive Use of Force* (New York: The Free Press, 1993); Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*; Lou Cannon, *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD* (New York: Times Books, 1997); Gerald Woods, *The Police in Los Angeles: Reform and Professionalization* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993); Steven Kelly Herbert, *Policing Space: Territoriality and the Los Angeles Police Department* (Minneapolis, MI and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Janice Appier, *Policing Women: The Sexual Politics of Law Enforcement and the L.A.P.D.* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Renford Reese, *Leadership in the LAPD: Walking the Tightrope* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2005); Kramer, *William H. Parker and the Thin Blue Line*; John Buntin, *L.A. Noir: The Struggle for the Soul of America's Most Seductive City* (New York: Harmony Books, 2009).

and black men, have a prominent position in many works on African American film, including those of Paula Massood, Manthia Diawarra, Norman K. Denzin, Sherril D. Antonio and Ed Guerrero, while Linda Williams has placed the ‘melodramas’ associated with Rodney King and O.J. Simpson in their historical and cultural context. By comparison, there are relatively few studies of Latino or Asian American filmic representation, with the notable exceptions of the works by Charles Ramirez Berg and Peter Feng, both of which deal with filmic stereotypes. Los Angeles as a filmic location features heavily in Haden R. Guest’s study of police procedurals of the Forties and Fifties and in Marilyn Yaquinto’s analysis of America’s rogue cops.⁴²

To a large extent, the history of both the L.A.P.D. and its cinematic representation are discourses of whiteness and of masculinity. Within a large and rapidly-growing body of literature on these subjects, Richard Dyer, David Roediger and Daniel Bernardi have described the privileged position of whiteness in representation, George Lipsitz has clarified its role as an economic imperative and Michael Kimmel has placed modern masculine concerns in an American historical context. However, most analyses of

⁴² Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*; Liam Kennedy, *Race and Urban Space in Contemporary American Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000); Klein, *The History of Forgetting*; Kenneth James Fox, *Cinematic Visions of Los Angeles: Representations of Identity and Mobility in the Cinematic City*, Ph.D. thesis, Queen Mary, University of London, 2006; Paula Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003); Manthia Diawara (ed.), *Black American Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993); Denzin, *Reading Race*; Sherril D. Antonio, *Contemporary African American Cinema* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002); Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*; Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas in Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001); Charles Ramirez Berg, *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, Resistance* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002); Peter X. Feng (ed.), *Screening Asian Americans* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Haden R. Guest, *The Police Procedural film: Law and Order in the American Cinema*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2006; Marilyn Yaquinto, *Policing the World: American Mythologies and Hollywood’s Rogue Cop Character*, Ph.D. dissertation, Bowling Green State University, 2006.

masculinity within police movies are to be found within more general studies of films or within gender issues of a specific era. The procedurals of the Forties and Fifties are discussed within the context of *film noir* by Frank Krutnik and James Naremore, and within the general context of Fifties screen-masculinity by Steven Cohan. There is also a great deal of published material on the hyper-masculine heroes of the Eighties, most notably in the work of Susan Jeffords. Broader perspectives on police officers and cinematic constructions of masculinity can be found in the work of Brian Baker and especially in that of Philippa Gates who, in 2006, published an examination of representations of masculinity in detective films from the origins of cinema to the present day.⁴³

The existence of such an array of literature poses particular challenges for any researcher seeking to provide original insights into police movies or into the history of Los Angeles and its police force. Each film which is discussed in detail within this thesis has been the subject of academic investigation and many of them have generated a significant amount of published material. Nevertheless, this thesis pursues an original line of enquiry by examining the films within the context of discourses of law-enforcement in Los Angeles over a period which saw major changes in the reputation of the L.A.P.D. and even greater

⁴³ Richard Dyer, *White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997); David Roediger, *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2002); Daniel Bernardi, *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2008); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006); Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1998); Steven Cohan, *Masked Men: Masculinity and Movies in the Fifties* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997); Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Brian Baker, *Masculinity in Fiction and Film: Representing Men in Popular Genres 1945-2000* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006); Gates, *Detecting Men*.

changes in its cinematic representation. In the final decade of the twentieth century, a force which had been a power in local politics since 1950 and which, as a pioneer in modern approaches to policing, had promoted itself as a role-model for other urban police departments, found itself vilified, demoralised and politically emasculated. In the cinema, Sergeant Joe Friday, the honest, upright and white hero of *Dragnet* (1954), had been replaced by Sergeant Alonzo Harris, the corrupt, murderous and black villain of *Training Day*.

II. From World War II to Watts

1. Introduction

It's most plausible that Chief Parker is the most powerful man in Los Angeles. He is the white community's saviour, their symbol of security.

Otis Chandler, publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*, 18 July 1966.¹

After many years in which cinematic police officers had been overshadowed, in the words of Philippa Gates, by 'the gentleman sleuth' or the 'hard-boiled private eye', the films of the Forties and Fifties were notable for a significant upgrading of the image of the police in general and of detectives in particular. At a time when the anxieties of American society were accentuated by anti-communism at home and by adversarial relationships with communist states abroad, the cinema offered its audiences the reassurance of the police procedurals. In these showcases for the activities of detectives or Federal agents, male protagonists were generally devoid of the disillusionment and alienation associated with their *film noir* counterparts. Through their organised, methodical approach to fighting crime, their adoption of modern technology and their devotion to duty, these investigators were represented as effective and committed crime-fighters who brought to the cinema screen the qualities of the professionalism which was being increasingly embraced by police forces across America.²

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, Los Angeles was an important location for developments in both real-life policing and in its filmic representation. From 1950, until his death in 1966, the L.A.P.D. was led by Chief William H. Parker, a leading exponent of police-professionalisation, who came to rival F.B.I. Director J. Edgar Hoover as the most famous police officer in the United States. For most of the remaining years of the century,

¹ Buntin, *L.A. Noir*, p. 322.

² Philippa Gates, 'A Brief History of the Detective Film', found at <www.crimeculture.com/Contents/CrimeFilms-5.htm> on 20 May 2009, pp. 2-3.

the operations of the L.A.P.D. would continue to be influenced by the model of policing which he developed. Throughout Parker's term of office, the most famous fictional police officer in America was L.A.P.D. Detective Sergeant Joe Friday (Jack Webb), the tough but honest star of *Dragnet*, perhaps the most influential of all the procedurals.³

Chief Parker and professionalisation

Parker, whose police career in Los Angeles spanned forty years, punctuated only by a brief but impressive period of service in war-time Europe, is widely acknowledged as the founding father of the modern L.A.P.D. As Chief, he inherited a force with a long-standing reputation for corruption and used his experience as a former head of Internal Affairs, coupled with his own scrupulous honesty, to transform it into what, for many years, would be widely regarded as America's leading police force.⁴ Alisa Kramer has described his approach to this task as a combination of adaptation and innovation, noting that Parker combined the ideas of earlier police reformers, such as former L.A.P.D. Chief Augustus Vollmer, and of contemporaries, such as J. Edgar Hoover, with the para-military structure which had been implemented in Los Angeles by his immediate predecessor, General William A. Worton. He also used his long experience of the city and his own perspectives upon society and the role of the police to shape the future of the L.A.P.D. Kramer describes Parker as a stern, self-righteous individual, a devout Roman Catholic and a fierce opponent

³ *Dragnet*, which began as a radio series in 1949, began its long run as a highly-influential television series in 1951 and was subsequently released as a feature film. For more details see Chapter II, Section 3, *Dragnet* (1954).

⁴ For the significance of Chief Parker see Woods, *The Police in Los Angeles*, pp. 223-42; Cannon, *Official Negligence*, pp. 54-75; Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, pp. 104-116; Reese, *Leadership in the LAPD*, pp. 3-7; Kramer, *William H. Parker and the Thin Blue Line*.

of communism, which he saw as the evil influence which lay behind most of the dissident groups which emerged in the Fifties and Sixties. In Parker's world-view, the police represented 'the thin blue line' which stood between civilisation and the forces of 'crime, communism and moral corruption'.⁵

The longstanding unwillingness of the Los Angeles electorate to fund civic expenditure through taxation meant that, like his predecessors, Parker faced the challenge of policing a vast urban area with significantly fewer police officers per head of population than any other major American city.⁶ His solution was a combination of organisational design, technology and behavioural ethos. He set out to rid the L.A.P.D. of corruption by establishing Intelligence Division to lead the fight against organised crime, creating an increasingly centralised command structure and ensuring transparency between the operations of other key divisions. A newly created Planning and Research Division, which Alisa Kramer has described as his most significant contribution to modern police management, used a variety of analytical tools to guide its operations and developed a comprehensive operations manual which became a prototype for police forces across America.⁷ Parker recognised the importance of public relations and invested heavily in creating a division dedicated to ensuring that, wherever possible, his preferred public image of the L.A.P.D. was reflected in all media reports and representations.⁸ Maintaining that officers were not social workers, he cut expenditure on community-friendly activities such

⁵ Kramer, *William H. Parker and the Thin Blue Line*, p. 68.

⁶ Peter J. Boyer, 'Bad Cops', *New Yorker*, 21 May 2001, p. 64.

⁷ Kramer, *William H. Parker and the Thin Blue Line*, p. 57.

⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 43-44. Perhaps the most famous member of this division was Gene Rodenberry who, after leaving the L.A.P.D., created *Star Trek*, the highly popular television series, subsequently translated into several feature films. Rumours persist that Parker was Rodenberry's model for the character of the famously humourless Dr. Spock (Leonard Nimoy).

as youth development programmes and concentrated his resources upon fighting crime. He championed the introduction of helicopters as a means of ‘systematic aerial surveillance’ across a sprawling urban landscape.⁹ His officers were required to demonstrate ‘command presence’ and to adopt what Parker himself termed as ‘proactive policing’, based upon an imperative ‘to stop crime before it happened’, an approach more-colourfully described by Joe Domanick as: ‘Give no slack, and take no shit from anyone.’¹⁰ This para-military combination of technology, deployment and attitude deliberately kept personal connections between L.A.P.D. officers and the communities which they served to a minimum and thus insulated the police from the influence of local politicians, a step which Parker saw as essential in eliminating the corruption which had plagued the force for most of its previous history.

Parker placed great emphasis upon the selection and training of officers and the most overt manifestation of his commitment to professionalisation was the Police Academy, an institution compared to a marine boot-camp by the many military veterans who passed through its gates and described by Gerald Woods as ‘the West Point of police training’.¹¹ However, if professionalisation found its iconic image in the Academy, its most important consequence arose from the assertion that a police force should be in complete control of its own disciplinary processes. In 1934, then-Lieutenant Parker, serving as a representative on the Fire and Police Protective League, had negotiated a revision of Section 202 of the City Charter which provided L.A.P.D. officers with a guarantee that only a Board of Rights, consisting of fellow officers, could impose disciplinary penalties. Then, in 1937, he had obtained another, even more significant charter amendment, which

⁹ Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 251.

¹⁰ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p.12.

¹¹ Woods, *The Police in Los Angeles*, p. 229.

extended the same protection to the Chief of Police. Parker realised that, in the hands of a politically astute Chief, this regulation effectively guaranteed the freedom to operate without civilian interference, a privileged position of which both he and his successors would take full advantage until 1992, long after the survival of equivalent powers in any other major American city. Parker exploited the political potential of his office to the full, seizing the opportunity to promote the public image of the L.A.P.D. from any available platform and investing considerable resources into gathering a wide range of intelligence. Throughout his career, most Los Angeles politicians were reluctant to confront a Chief who was not only popular with the white electorate, but who was also suspected of holding intelligence dossiers on anyone perceived as a threat. Although technically answerable to the Police Commission, in practice, Parker was able to operate the police department as ‘an unaccountable bureaucratic power’. In the words of Joe Domanick: ‘A quasi-military organization had declared itself independent of the rest of city government and placed itself ... outside of the democratic system of checks and balances.’¹²

Vanilla Suburbs, Chocolate City

When Parker became Chief, whites still dominated both Los Angeles and its police force, accounting for seventy-six percent of the population of the city but ninety percent of the L.A.P.D. During his term of office, while the demographics of the L.A.P.D. evolved gradually, the racial characteristics of the city changed at a much faster pace. By 1966, although whites remained the biggest population group in Los Angeles at approximately sixty-five percent, African Americans accounted for seventeen percent and Latinos for

¹² Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, pp. 95, 160, 198.

thirteen percent.¹³ Accompanying this change in racial composition were significant developments in spatiality, affecting America in general and Los Angeles in particular. Nation-wide, the Fifties saw a combination of huge Federal road building programmes, substantial increases in automobile ownership and subsidised mortgages, all of which supported the migration to suburbia of more than twenty million citizens, an overwhelming majority of whom were white.¹⁴ As noted in Chapter I, Eric Avila has pointed out that the consequences of this phenomenon were particularly marked in Los Angeles, which led the nation in terms of per-capita ownership of homes and automobiles and where spatial developments were accelerated by the construction of the freeway network. In Avila's opinion, the freeways serve to perpetuate racial separation in Los Angeles by allowing wealthy commuters to cross the poorer areas of the city within a screened corridor which insulates them from any real contact with its residents. Thus, he argues, the freeway-network mediates a privileged view of the metropolis in the same way that the structured space of Disneyland mediates a privileged perspective of America's small-town past.¹⁵

Despite Parker's apparently unrivalled power in Los Angeles and his immense popularity with its dominant white community, the relationships between his predominantly white police force and the racial minorities of the inner city would prove to be his Achilles heel. Although the L.A.P.D. had employed black officers from 1886 onwards, during Parker's term of office African Americans and Latinos collectively represented only approximately ten percent of the force and were generally denied access to leadership

¹³ Wood, *The Police in Los Angeles*, p. 235 and *City of Los Angeles Census 2000*. Before 1970, since the census did not distinguish 'non-Hispanic whites' as a separate racial group, the numbers for whites and Hispanics are estimates.

¹⁴ Paul S. Boyer, *et al* eds., *The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), p. 859.

¹⁵ Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, pp. 206-208, 211.

positions. Some became plain-clothes investigators but their work was confined to crime within their own communities and black patrolmen were organised into segregated units until 1961, when Parker succumbed to pressure from Mayor Sam Yorty and integrated patrol-cars.¹⁶ While the white communities of Los Angeles ensured that minorities were excluded from their residential areas through restrictive housing covenants and discriminatory lending practices, Parker – according to Steven Kelly Herbert – saw his officers as protectors of white home-owners from the criminal tendencies of racial minorities. Like his predominantly white constituency, which was mostly insulated from crime and deprivation by the spatial composition of Los Angeles, the Chief’s concern about relations with minorities was limited and primarily focused upon crime prevention. The potential for conflict between the minority populations of the inner cities and a predominantly white force, many of whose officers lived in separate, suburban communities, was exacerbated by Parker’s model of policing. Herbert argues that an aggressive approach to the policing of high-crime areas inevitably resulted in increased clashes between white officers and minorities, while Parker’s detachment from these communities made him unresponsive to complaints about racism and brutality.¹⁷

Long before Parker became Chief, tensions between the L.A.P.D. and the minority communities of Los Angeles had been a recurrent theme in local discourses of law enforcement. In the Forties, the headlines had been dominated by conflicts between the police and the Latino community, most notably the Sleepy Lagoon incident of 1942 and the

¹⁶ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, pp. 170-71. One African American who managed to progress to the rank of Lieutenant in the L.A.P.D. was Tom Bradley, a future mayor of Los Angeles, who served as an officer from 1940 until 1961, when he resigned to pursue his political career.

¹⁷ Herbert, *Policing Space*, pp. 60, 81.

Zoot Suit Riots of 1943.¹⁸ As noted earlier, the beating of seven Latinos in police custody, in December 1951, popularly known as Bloody Christmas, led to a Grand Jury investigation and subjected Parker to a barrage of press criticism.¹⁹ Edward Escobar has argued that the pattern of conflict with the L.A.P.D. in the Fifties served to elevate the political sensibilities of Mexican Americans and claims that, as a racial minority, they ‘dominated the Los Angeles civil rights agenda until the early Sixties.’²⁰ In his 1959 testimony to the Civil Rights Commission, Parker gave his own, typically insensitive, opinion of the Mexican American population of the city: ‘Some of them have been here since before we were but some of them aren’t far removed from the wild tribes of Mexico.’²¹

Despite the prominence of Mexican American issues, the rapidly growing African American community had its own share of complaints throughout the 1950s, with the black-owned *California Eagle* regularly carrying reports of police brutality and the American Civil Liberties Union (A.C.L.U.) accusing the L.A.P.D. of harassment and of frequent false arrests.²² In the 1960s, as the civil rights movement gathered momentum and as the aspirations of African Americans increased throughout the United States, a pattern of increased black hostility to the L.A.P.D. and its aggressive policing methods became increasingly evident. Tensions were especially high in South Central Los Angeles and its

¹⁸ Following a murder at the Sleepy Lagoon Reservoir, more than six hundred Latinos were arrested, twenty-one of whom were eventually charged. Sixteen men were convicted, only for the verdicts to be reversed in 1944. The Zoot Suit Riots involved an attack on Latino men by off-duty sailors, violence to which the L.A.P.D., reportedly, turned a blind eye.

¹⁹ The Bloody Christmas incident and its consequences are discussed in detail in Chapter V, 2, *L.A. Confidential*, pp. 264-71.

²⁰ Escobar, *Race, Police and the Making of a Political Identity*, pp. 7, 11.

²¹ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 163.

²² Mina Yang, ‘A Thin Blue Line Down Central Avenue: The LAPD and the Decline of a Musical Hub’, *Black Music Research Journal*, vol. 22, 2002, p. 223, n. 1.

near-neighbour Watts, where African Americans represented eighty percent of the local population. In 1962, an L.A.P.D. raid on the Nation of Islam Mosque had attracted widespread criticism, notably from Malcolm X who told a packed local press conference that Parker ‘has unleashed a hate campaign against Negroes and he has convinced the press that Negroes are criminal and that if they beat them with clubs, that’s OK.’²³ An editorial in the *California Eagle* described the police raid as ‘the almost inevitable outcome of an ever mounting hostility between police and ... the Negro community.’²⁴ In August 1965, these tensions came to a head when an apparently routine traffic stop in Watts escalated into what was, at that time, the most destructive race riot in American history, leaving thirty-four people dead, more than one thousand injured and a trail of property damage amounting to more than forty million dollars.²⁵ The L.A.P.D. proved to be powerless to halt the destruction and was dependent upon the arrival of thousands of National Guardsmen and Federal troops to bring order back to the streets of Los Angeles.

Social and cultural change

Although the post-World War II economic power and military expenditure of the United States ensured its global political and commercial hegemony, its citizens were, nevertheless, subject to considerable anxieties. From 1949 onwards, the Soviet Union successfully tested nuclear weapons of ever-increasing power, culminating in the H-Bomb, while the Korean War brought America into direct conflict with China. A series of Cold

²³ Grace E. Simons, ‘Chief Parker Called “Drunk With Power”; Muslims Supported’, *California Eagle*, 10 May 1962, pp. 1, 3.

²⁴ ‘Muslims and Police’, *California Eagle*, 3 May 1962, p. 4.

²⁵ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 184.

War crises was followed in 1957 by the launch of Sputnik, a breakthrough which created the spectre of Soviet dominance in space. These external threats were reinforced domestically by a variety of spy scandals and by the paranoia generated by McCarthyism and the work of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC).

Many of the tensions in post-war life stemmed from the demobilisation of ten million servicemen between 1945 and 1948. Even in a booming economy, the re-absorption of so many men in so short a time created several difficulties. For many women, it threatened to undermine the greater freedom and increased earning power which they had enjoyed during war time. The men themselves faced the challenges of re-integration into family life and into a workplace where, in the opinion of Steven Cohan, an increasingly corporate culture valued conformity above individuality and where the returning soldier was required to trade in 'his 1940s khaki regulation uniform for a 1950s gray flannel one.'²⁶ National employment trends were changing rapidly and 1956 would mark the point at which white-collar employees first outnumbered their colleagues in blue-collars. America's migration to suburbia had coincided with the explosive growth in household penetration of television sets, which rose from less than one percent in 1946 to fifty percent by 1953.²⁷ Many popular programmes featured suburban, consumer-oriented, upper-middle class couples whose pursuit of the American dream represented the husband as a white-collar breadwinner while the role of the wife was devoted to home and children.

Although the baby boom was in full swing, this romanticised version of domesticity was never entirely representative and, by 1951, one third of women of working age were

²⁶ Cohan, *Masked Men*, pp xi-xii.

²⁷ Boyer, *et al*, eds., *The Enduring Vision*, pp. 830, 858.

employed in the labour force, most of whom were working wives.²⁸ Even the traditional notion of heterosexual marriage as the bedrock of American society came under threat, as more than one million war-time unions were legally dissolved and as Alfred Kinsey's research made it clear that homosexual experiences among American men were more common than had previously been assumed.²⁹ This evidence of sexual fluidity was seized upon by HUAC as support for its allegations of the presence within the Federal Government of a large number of homosexuals who, through reasons of assumed deviance and liability to blackmail, were directly associated with the communist threat. In 1952, homosexuality became an official reason for denial of entry to the United States.³⁰

Change in the Cinema

Although the American film industry in the 1940s and 1950s remained essentially conservative, relying upon the well-established foundations of the studio system, of familiar genres and of bankable stars, the challenge from television stimulated a number of changes. An increase in the number of colour productions was accompanied by the development of new technologies, such as CinemaScope, and the introduction of novel exhibition practices, such as Drive-Ins.³¹ However, the efforts of the industry to generate revenue, both at home and abroad, were hampered by a variety of constraining influences. Opportunities in overseas markets were restricted both by local protectionism and by the

²⁸ Kristen Hatch, '1951-Movies and the New Face of Masculinity', in Murray Pomerance, ed., *American Cinema of the 1950s: Themes and Variations* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 51.

²⁹ Boyer, *et al*, eds., *The Enduring Vision*, p. 816.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 839

³¹ Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, pp. 387, 392.

insistence of the State Department that Hollywood's products should reflect an acceptable image of America abroad. At home, under the continuing influence of the Production Code and of external pressures from the Catholic Legion of Decency and HUAC, many subjects remained off-limits to film-makers, while depictions of social issues or of racial tensions remained suspect. Despite these 'socially and aesthetically conservative parameters', Peter Lev has pointed out that films in the 1950s nevertheless managed to accommodate a broad spectrum of cinematic output, including genres ranging from *film noir* to teen-pics and directorial styles ranging from Cecil B. De Mille to John Cassavetes.³²

Within these decades, most cinematic representations of policing fell within the category of the police procedural, a sub-genre of the crime film for which the majority of scholarly analysis is to be found within discussions of *film noir*, a style of film-making with which the procedurals were linked both chronologically and stylistically. Frank Krutnik notes that the procedurals were 'often fictionalised accounts of true stories' and associates their 'realist aesthetic' with the influences of war-time documentaries and newsreels. In his opinion, the procedural can be identified by its 'systematised technological investigative procedure' and is characterised by organisation and objectivity, compared to the more intuitive approach associated with cinematic private investigators, or the 'two-fisted individualism' which characterised portrayals of the F.B.I. in 1930s films such as *G-Men* (1935).³³ Philippa Gates, in her study of detective films and masculinity, devotes only five pages to the procedurals but nevertheless credits them as originators of two significant themes which are discernible in modern police dramas, especially those on television: the

³² Lev, *Transforming the Screen 1950-59*, pp. 4-5, 7-11, 25-26.

³³ Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street*, pp. 202-3, 207.

depiction of the police officer as everyman rather than as an heroic figure and the emphasis on scientific methods of detection.³⁴

The most comprehensive account of the police procedural, its place in the history of film and its relationships with trends in American society, is to be found in Haden R. Guest's Ph.D. dissertation, *The Police Procedural Film*. Guest echoes the opinion of Philippa Gates in arguing that, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, these films boosted the increasing claims to professionalism made by police forces throughout America but also identifies their importance as 'a collective expression of Hollywood's gradual conservative turn.' In a period when the film industry was increasingly 'policed' by a combination of the Production Code and the blacklist, and when studios were increasingly pre-occupied with the challenges arising from the *Paramount* decision, from the activities of HUAC and from their own fight against unions, the presence of federal agents on studio back-lots was increasingly common. As these 'various legal nooses tightened around postwar Hollywood', Guest has identified the police procedural as a product of a climate of 'mutual interest' between the studios, law enforcement and popular culture. Although acknowledging that *film noir* and the procedurals are 'genres involved in an active dialogue with each other', he also identifies important distinguishing features, in visual style, narrative modes and in the differing use of voice-overs. While the *mise en scène* most commonly associated with *noir* was the dystopic inner city, Guest notes that the procedural was dominated by the 'carefully mapped linear corridors' of the police station. The *noir* narrative often involved mystery and the 'delirious use of flashbacks', while the procedural usually began with a crime and its perpetrator and built its suspense around the progress of the police investigation. Whereas the typical *noir* voice-over was delivered in the first

³⁴ Gates, *Detecting Men*, p. 91.

person and was both personal and fearful, Guest notes that the procedural voice-overs normally came from an unidentified male third-party source, speaking with a confidence which he links with the perception of an omniscient and far-reaching police authority.³⁵ Although the Fifties had seen the cinema recognise the existence of minorities in modern America, notably through the ‘social problem’ films and through the increasingly visible screen presence of Sidney Poitier, the procedurals dealt, almost exclusively, with white police officers in pursuit of white criminals.

As befitting its position as a preferred location for *film noir*, Los Angeles also provided the backdrop for several procedurals, beginning with Anthony Mann’s *T-Men* (1947), a story of Treasury Agents pursuing counterfeit money. Other films of note include André de Toth’s *Crime Wave* (1954) and three entries in the ‘rogue cop cycle’, a group of melodramas based around the personal torments of individual police officers and the women in their lives: Joseph Losey’s *The Prowler* (1951), Don Siegel’s *Private Hell 36* (1954), and Gerd Oswald’s *Crime of Passion* (1957). In this chapter, I examine two films which span the period from the years immediately preceding Parker’s appointment to the peak of his powers in the mid-Fifties. Alfred Werker’s *He Walked By Night* reveals some of the prevailing anxieties of the immediate post-war years and foregrounds the increasing importance of forensic science as a pillar of police professionalisation. Jack Webb’s *Dragnet* (1954), an early example of a successful transition from television to the cinema, gained authenticity through its close working relationship with the L.A.P.D. but paid the price by conceding control over its content to the Chief of Police. The film dramatises the murder of an organised-crime associate while providing its audience with Chief Parker’s perspective on a variety of constitutional restraints upon police officers.

³⁵ Guest, *The Police Procedural Film*, pp. 7, 12-13, 141-42.

2. *He Walked By Night* (1948)

This is a true story ... Only the names are changed to protect the innocent.

Voice-over, *He Walked By Night*.

Alfred Werker's *He Walked By Night* may not be the most famous of Hollywood's police procedurals but, through serendipity, it has a claim to be considered among the most influential films of its type. During its filming, discussions between Jack Webb and L.A.P.D. technical adviser Marty Wynn inspired Webb to create *Dragnet*, a realistic police drama which was first aired on radio and which would subsequently become a highly influential television series and a successful feature film. However, both the style and the content of *He Walked By Night* are also of great intrinsic interest. Frank Krutnik observes that the film illustrates 'the differences between the representational modes of the so-called "film noir" and the "semi-documentary"', modes which he believes 'represent different facets of Hollywood's realist aesthetic during the second half of the 1940s.'³⁶ The story itself reflects two issues which were prominent in contemporary discourse: the risks posed to American society by the re-integration of millions of World War II veterans and the increasing importance of technology in police work.

The film establishes its claim to realism with its opening banner: 'Coming from the Homicide Files of the Los Angeles Police'. This is followed by a lingering shot of a large street map, prominently indicating the 'City of Los Angeles'. Long segments are 'semi-documentary' and include voice-over commentary, sometimes explaining the sequence of events within the fiction but often providing factual guidance to its setting. Los Angeles is described as a city of more than two million people, spread over four hundred and fifty square miles and not only the largest police beat in the country but 'one of the toughest'. The majority of screen-time is devoted to the L.A.P.D.'s unremitting pursuit of a man who

³⁶ Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street*, p. 206.

has murdered one of their own and includes detailed descriptions of the procedures and technologies employed. Much of the action takes place at night with heavy emphasis upon the contrast between light and shadows, while the closing scenes, set in the sewers below Los Angeles, are illuminated only by the torches of the pursuing police officers. As Krutnik points out, the scenes featuring the murderer are shot in the *noir* style, with ‘chiaroscuro lighting, compositional imbalance and low-angle shots’, while the police scenes generally show ‘balance and order.’³⁷ Alfred Werker is credited as director but it is widely believed that Anthony Mann, a long term collaborator of cinematographer John Alton, was heavily involved on an un-credited basis.³⁸

Although *He Walked By Night* is a work of fiction, it is based upon the well-documented exploits of a larger-than-life character who, in 1946, became notorious for a one-man crime wave. Erwin ‘Machine Gun’ Walker, a World War II veteran, stole some weapons from the military and committed a string of burglaries. An expert in electronics, he planned to use the proceeds of these robberies to finance the design and construction of a ‘death ray’ machine which he hoped would bring an end to wars. Unfortunately, in the course of these crimes, he managed to murder a C.H.P. officer and to wound two detectives in a gun fight. His ability to elude capture, despite significant deployment of police resources, was aided by the knowledge of police communications technology which he had gained while working as a dispatcher for the Glendale Police Department and by his ingenious use of the sewers of Los Angeles as his escape route. Although Walker had apparently served bravely as a Lieutenant in charge of a World War II communications squadron, a deadly raid on his unit, which resulted in the bayoneting of one of his men, had

³⁷ Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street*, p. 206.

³⁸ Dan Georgakas, ‘The Beloved Bs’, *Cineaste*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1 July 1997, p. 55.

left him with survivor's guilt and with other symptoms of what, twenty years later, would become recognised as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (P.T.S.D.). Walker was originally sentenced to death but, following a suicide attempt while on Death Row in San Quentin, was subsequently declared insane and committed to a psychiatric hospital.³⁹

The link between *He Walked By Night* and the case of Erwin Walker was reinforced by the presence on the set of Marty Wynn and Jack Donahoe, the L.A.P.D. detectives who had made his arrest, both of whom are credited as technical advisers.⁴⁰ Roy Martin (Richard Basehart), the filmic version of Walker, is also an army veteran, an electronics expert and an ex-police dispatcher who commits a variety of burglaries and robberies to finance his desire to develop his own inventions. Martin's background in the armed forces is established during his early and fatal confrontation with a police officer, who suspects him of attempting to burgle an electronics store. When told to produce identification, Martin first asks if his 'Military Discharge' will suffice and then pulls out a gun and shoots the officer, who eventually dies from his wounds. Like Walker, Martin stays one step ahead of the police by listening to their radio messages and uses the sewer network as his means of escape. However, Martin does not survive to face trial but, in the closing scene of the film, is gunned down by police officers after a chase through the sewers, a dramatic finale captured on film one year before Harry Lime (Orson Welles) was chased through the sewers of Vienna in Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949).

In depicting Martin as an unstable, returning veteran, *He Walked By Night* reflects a concern which was commonplace in the immediate post-war years and which has been

³⁹ 'Suspect in Highway Patrolman's Killing Shot and Seized in Battle', *Los Angeles Times*, 21 December 1946, p. 3. Glendale is a small, independent city on the northeastern fringe of Los Angeles.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 3. Wynn and Donahoe had also worked together on the infamous, and still unsolved, 'Black Dahlia' murder.

highlighted in several studies of the 1940s and 1950s, especially those concerned with constructions of masculinity. Steven Cohan describes the apprehensions surrounding the return to civilian life of millions of servicemen, all of whom had been trained to kill and some of whom were ‘shell shocked’.⁴¹ Brian Baker underlines the contemporary fear of the ‘damaged veteran’, a returning soldier who had been traumatised by conflict and whose potential for violence posed a risk to civilised society.⁴² Partial support for these scholarly assessments is provided by several contemporary articles in the *Los Angeles Times*, which provide insights into both national and local perspectives on the issue. In January 1946, the scale of the problem was stressed in an article claiming that two million veterans were likely to settle in the Greater Los Angeles metropolitan area and suggesting that many of them would need psychological counselling.⁴³ One month later, a report indicated that ‘Postwar Jitters’ were responsible for a significant increase in cases brought before the Los Angeles County Psychopathic Court and that most of these involved ‘combat-scarred G.I.s ... gone suddenly violent after a period of moroseness.’⁴⁴ In the following year, Agnes Meyer provided a different version of the numbers involved in estimating that the City of Los Angeles was home to six hundred thousand veterans, many of whom had chosen not to return to their home state. However, the article also stressed the large number of cases of mental instability and commented upon the frequency with which these men ‘returning to civilian life, break down’ citing a recent example of a man who ‘had blown his head off.’⁴⁵

⁴¹ Cohan, *Masked Men*, p. 46.

⁴² Baker, *Masculinity in Fiction and Film*, p. 1.

⁴³ Bess M. Wilson, ‘Problem Posed By Vast Gain in Resident Vets’, *Los Angeles Times*, 6 January 1946, p. C1.

⁴⁴ ‘Postwar Jitters Bring Increase In Mental Cases’, *Los Angeles Times*, 11 February 1946, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Agnes E. Meyer, ‘Los Angeles’ Flood of Veterans’, *Los Angeles Times*, 18 May 1947, p. A4.

Another cause for concern, which received much less publicity, was the link between returning servicemen and firearms. Not only had these men been trained to use firearms but, according to at least one report, they had carried home many of these weapons as ‘souvenirs’. The article claims that, on just one troopship, four thousand six hundred soldiers carried home thirty thousand firearms, all of which had been ‘taken aboard ship openly with Army permits’. Without citing any references, the writer went on to allege that ‘50% of the country’s crimes are now committed with trophy weapons, either stolen or purchased from returning veterans.’⁴⁶

In common with most procedurals, having first exposed a threat to society in the form of a criminal, *He Walked By Night* then sets out to reassure its audience of the competence of the police to ensure public safety, through a combination of organisation, procedure, personnel and technology. The film devotes a reasonable amount of time to praising the speed and efficiency with which the police respond to any crime, with particular stress upon the transportation and communications technology which was required in an area as vast as Los Angeles. After Martin’s murder of the police officer, the L.A.P.D. makes full use of a series of crisp radio messages to dispatch large numbers of patrol cars and motor-cycle officers to the scene of the crime. The Captain in charge then uses the same technology to order a ‘dragnet’, effectively an indiscriminate police sweep of everyone in the area, which leads to relentless questioning of a large number of potential suspects. Another sequence shows an example of the contemporary use of information technology, as an automatic card sorter allows the police to collate records of all similar burglaries from the ‘Modus Operandi’ files.

⁴⁶ ‘Death on the Mantel Shelf’, *Los Angeles Times*, 11 April 1948, p. A4.

However, *He Walked By Night* is most notable for its depiction of a corner-stone of police professionalism in what Dan Georkakas has described as the ‘then ultra-modern police technology’ of forensic science.⁴⁷ Even in 2011, after apparently unremitting exposure on television through eleven seasons of *C.S.I.: Crime Scene Investigation* and several years of its spin-offs, *C.S.I. NY* and *C.S.I. Miami*, the appetite of the American public for entertainment based around the application of science to the apprehension of criminals seems to be undimmed. In 1948, such extensive coverage of forensic techniques was not available on television and *He Walked By Night* was notable for including a significant supporting role for Police Scientist Lee Whitey (Jack Webb), who enjoys sufficient screen-time to provide the audience with detailed explanations of a variety of procedures. Whitey identifies the contents of a small phial, which has been found in the glove compartment of Martin’s car, as nitro-glycerine and, after demonstrating its explosive properties, explains that this particular type of ‘safe-cracker soup’ has been de-sensitised to allow safe handling. He uses tool marking technology to identify the type of lock-picks used in one of Martin’s attempted burglaries and gives a careful explanation of the ballistics science which allows him to prove that the same gun had been used in a variety of crimes.

Most of the forensic techniques displayed in *He Walked By Night* had been available for many years, with several important advances having been made in the 1920s. In that decade, Luke May had pioneered tool mark comparison, Calvin Goddard had popularised the use of microscopy for bullet comparison at the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1926 and August Vollmer, then L.A.P.D. Chief, had established America’s first crime

⁴⁷ Georkakas, ‘The Beloved Bs’, p. 55.

laboratory in 1924.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the amount of time that the film dedicates to explanations of Whitey's methods suggests that, for the cinema audience, the technology provided a new and interesting viewing experience. Certainly, contemporary newspapers were convinced of public interest in the application of science to solve crimes and devoted many column inches to the subject. For example, a *Los Angeles Times* report of a 1946 murder claimed that 'Analytical experts of five agencies yesterday were hard at work concluding scientific tests of blood' found in a suspect's car and that 'ballistics specialists ... armed with two .38 caliber slugs taken from the mutilated corpse were ready to match them against the death-dealing pistol.'⁴⁹ Another murder report, from 1949, reported that: 'the widening police hunt pinned its main hope on science to provide clues that might lead to the slayer.' The article went on to refer to a panoply of scientific tests including a newly-devised acid phosphatase test for semen, a paraffin block test to determine if bruising was pre- or post-mortem, fingerprint identification and the use of botanists to identify a twig found at the crime scene.⁵⁰

Within the wide range of forensic techniques on display in *He Walked By Night*, the most original insight is provided in a scene which demonstrates the use of what, at the time, represented ground-breaking technology in the field of forensic art. Using a series of sketches of a variety of typical male facial characteristics, which are converted into slides, the police convene a meeting of witnesses to some of Martin's crimes and use their memories to select a number of slides which are progressively superimposed to create a

⁴⁸ Norah Rudin and Keith Inman, 'Forensic Science Timeline', found at <<http://www.forensicdna.com/Timeline020702.pdf>> on 4 August 2010.

⁴⁹ 'Blood Found in Car Tested', *Los Angeles Times*, 24 January 1946, p. 2.

⁵⁰ 'Springer Murder Tips Flood Police', *Los Angeles Times*, 18 June, 1949, p. 3. Reflecting the sensibilities of the era, the semen test was described as a means of determining if the female victim had been 'criminally assaulted.'

composite picture. The use of a composite portrait as a means of identifying a suspect had a long history, notably including a Scotland Yard poster produced as early as 1881, while audiences familiar with Western movies would have been well aware that ‘Wanted’ posters had been widely used on the American frontier in the nineteenth century. However, in 1948, the process represented during this scene marked a significant advance in technology since, according to Forensic Artist Karen T. Taylor, ‘the notion of a hand-assembled system for building facial composites’ did not become common until the 1950s. In the early years of that decade, the approach would be commercialised by Smith and Wesson and branded as the Identi-Kit. As described by Taylor, the system is identical to the process used in the film: ‘The earliest Identi-Kit was composed of clear sheets called “foils”, which were printed with various facial features. At the direction of a witness, these foils could be stacked one on top of another to create a face. The early kits were from hand-drawn component features and the resulting composites had a “sketch’ quality”.’⁵¹ Although Taylor also notes that Hugh MacDonald of the L.A.P.D. was one of several police officers to have claimed credit for the concept of composite assembly, there is no evidence to suggest that the technique had been used to capture Erwin Walker. However, a detective in *He Walked By Night* claims that the idea had been developed in Chicago for a kidnapping case, a suggestion supported by an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, published in 1950, which described the work of Al Valanis, a police artist whose pictures had been used in Chicago for ‘several years.’ After providing witnesses with a variety of standard facial features from which to make an initial selection, Valanis would then make a provisional

⁵¹ Karen T. Taylor, *Forensic Art and Illustration* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2000), pp. 12, 21-2.

sketch which would be modified based upon further feedback from the witnesses.⁵² *The Hollywood Reporter*, while describing the film as ‘one of the screen’s finest inspections of a police department in efficient operation’, reserved particular praise for the composite portrait, which it described as ‘a gem of police work.’⁵³ The process of producing the composite sketch may have been at the cutting edge of contemporary technology but, as the voice-over makes clear, the police were still reliant upon traditional methods to find their man: ‘And so the tedious quest went on. Sergeant Brennan wore out his shoes and his patience going from police station to police station, checking photos until his eyes were blurry.’

Apart from its original use of forensics, *He Walked By Night* distinguished itself from many other police movies set in Los Angeles through its contribution to filmic representation of the spatiality of the city and through a brief scene which acknowledges the presence of Latinos, both within the city and within the L.A.P.D. Martin’s use of the sewers as an escape route and hiding place allows the film to display an aspect of Los Angeles which is far removed from the more familiar icons of its physical structure. As Haden Guest has pointed out, these subterranean passages are an obvious metaphor for the criminal underworld and for the illicit communications and trade routes which supported its crimes. Guest argues that the use of the sewers ensures that the conflict between Martin and the L.A.P.D. is thus ‘set in spatial terms’, requiring the detectives to match his knowledge of the sewer network in order to track him down and to bring him to justice.⁵⁴ The reference

⁵² Bob Deindorfer, ‘He Catches Crooks With A Pencil’, *Los Angeles Times*, 23 April 1950, p. G12. In retirement, Valanis was hired as a technical advisor by Chester Gould, the creator of the *Dick Tracy* comic strips.

⁵³ ‘*He Walked By Night*’, *Hollywood Reporter*, 11 November 1948, *He Walked By Night*, Clippings File, Margaret Herrick Library, no page reference provided.

⁵⁴ Guest, *The Police Procedural Film*, pp. 158-59.

to the largest minority group within Los Angeles occurs during the Identi-Kit scene, when a Latina makes an effort to contribute to the composite sketch but, amid a crowd of other witnesses, struggles to express herself in English. Suddenly, she is assisted by a Latino plain-clothes officer, a calm authoritative figure who seems completely comfortable in his surroundings and who quickly helps her to articulate her thoughts. Latinos or, to use the more common contemporary term, Mexican Americans, had been employed by the L.A.P.D. from the beginning of the century and, in the aftermath of the Zoot Suit riots of 1943 ‘a significant number’ had been recruited from the ranks of returning war veterans. At the time the film was released, approximately five percent of L.A.P.D. officers were Latino, many of whom had been promoted to the detective bureau, where they were normally deployed to investigate crimes within the Spanish-speaking community, while the first Latina officer had been recruited as early as 1946.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, a filmic representation of a Latino officer was a rarity and, although this sequence barely lasts a minute and neither the detective nor the witness play any further part in the drama, it marks a minor milestone in cinematic representation. Not until the release of *The New Centurions* in 1972 would any film include a more significant role for a Latino L.A.P.D. officer.

⁵⁵ Escobar, *Race, Police and the Making of a Political Identity*, pp. 262-63; Gail Ryan, ‘Los Angeles Police Department’s First Female Academy Graduate’, found at <<http://www.wpoaca.com/archives/collier.htm>> on 28 September 2010.

3. *Dragnet* (1954)

‘*Dragnet*’ was one of the great instruments to show the people of the United States a picture of the policeman as he really is ... a hard-working, selfless man, willing to go out and brave all sorts of hazards and work long hours to protect the community.

Chief Parker, interviewed by Donald McDonald in 1962.⁵⁶

Within the framework of total unbelievability—within the notion of police officers who never lied, stole, cheated, had sex, slugged a low-life, tricked a witness, or acted in any way other than as neutered Eagle Scout—everything on ‘*Dragnet*’ had to be totally authentic.

Joe Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*.⁵⁷

While each film discussed within this thesis makes its own contribution to contemporary discourses of law enforcement and while many provide positive images of the police, only one movie was deliberately designed to represent an idealised version of the L.A.P.D. and to endorse its Chief’s position on a range of controversial issues. That film was *Dragnet* (1954), an early example of a highly rated television series seeking to exploit its popularity through the cinema.⁵⁸ When working as a technical adviser on *He Walked By Night*, L.A.P.D. detective Marty Wynn had complained to actor Jack Webb that ‘police are disgusted and furious at most crime movies because the action and characters are so far-fetched.’ Webb was sufficiently impressed by Wynn’s wish that ‘somebody in Hollywood would do an honest story about policemen’ to come up with the idea of *Dragnet*, a representation of policing in Los Angeles which was based upon real-life cases and which set out to distinguish itself by its authenticity.⁵⁹ In 1949, *Dragnet* was given its

⁵⁶ ‘The Police: One of a series of interviews on the American Character’, Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, 1962, p.12, cited in Skolnick and Fyfe, *Above the Law*, p. xi.

⁵⁷ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 124.

⁵⁸ ‘Summer Murders’, *Time*, 6 September 1954, no page reference provided, *Dragnet* Clippings File, Margaret Herrick Library. In Vincente Minelli’s *The Long, Long Trailer* (1953), Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, the stars of *I Love Lucy*, had reprised their television *personas* but with completely different names and backgrounds.

⁵⁹ Jack Webb quoted in Friedman, *Dragnet* File 651, HO 9_1251, 24 May 1954, U.S.C. Warner Bros. Archives. Henceforth, in order to avoid confusion with the radio or television

first public outing as a radio programme, which was sufficiently popular to remain on the air until 1957 and to be reinvented as a television series, running initially from 1951 until 1959 and, in a second series, from 1967 to 1970. In 1954, when the television show was rated second only to *I Love Lucy* in the United States, and when Joe Friday's adventures were available in the *Los Angeles Mirror* as a daily comic strip, *Dragnet* was released as a feature film which ranked twelfth at the American box-office and grossed \$4,750,000.⁶⁰ Webb, who had starred in both the radio and TV versions as Sergeant Joe Friday, directed himself in the same role in the movie.

From its origins on radio, *Dragnet* was anxious to maintain L.A.P.D. cooperation but, from the time that the television series began, Webb realised that the challenges of the visual medium made authenticity even more important. At the same time, Chief Parker, who had initially been uneasy about the connections between the L.A.P.D. and *Dragnet*, had been persuaded that the show offered a significant opportunity to influence public perceptions of the force. Thus Webb's increased need for the official imprimatur of the L.A.P.D. coincided with an increased willingness by its Chief to provide support. Parker's price was an insistence upon control over content, a demand which Webb was either unwilling or unable to resist. The success of the television series resulted in the production of *Dragnet* (1954) a filmic perspective on policing which was triply constrained: by Hollywood's prevailing conservatism; by the rigours of the Production Code; and by the world-view of the Chief of the L.A.P.D. The nature of that control becomes apparent in the way that the film engages with several controversial contemporary issues. Although rich in

versions, the unqualified use of *Dragnet* indicates representations on radio and television, while the feature film is identified as *Dragnet* (1954).

⁶⁰ Television ratings found at <<http://www.fiftiesweb.com/tv-ratings.htm>> on 13 September 2010 and box-office results found at <<http://www.boxofficereport.com/database/1954.shtm>> on 20 January 2009>.

the details of police organisation and procedures, the film acts as the mouthpiece of Chief Parker in its openly partisan stance on a number of constitutional questions that are portrayed as handicaps to effective policing.

Most accounts of the history of the L.A.P.D. acknowledge the importance of *Dragnet*, in its various manifestations, to the image of the force. Lou Cannon, in a chapter entitled 'The *Dragnet* Legacy', describes the franchise as Parker's 'greatest asset in selling the LAPD' and noted that while Jack Webb received unrivalled access and advice, Parker 'received the benefits of a program that captured the public imagination and glorified the LAPD'.⁶¹ Joe Domanick describes the portrayal of 'righteous, professional police protecting society against criminals' as 'an outstanding coup for Bill Parker and the LAPD'. He also points out that, in the wake of *Dragnet*, more than twenty-five network shows featured the L.A.P.D.⁶² In their study of police brutality, Skolnick and Fyfe entitled their prologue 'Whatever Happened to *Dragnet*' and concluded that Webb's idealised representation of the L.A.P.D. was not finally destroyed until the Rodney King videotape appeared on television.⁶³ The most comprehensive account of the history of *Dragnet* itself is to be found in Haden R. Guest's study of police procedurals, which includes detailed analysis of the radio and television series. Guest also emphasises the importance of *Dragnet*, which he describes as being 'among the most influential and lasting representations of law enforcement to emerge from postwar American popular culture.'⁶⁴

Dragnet (1954) follows a well-established pattern in contemporary police procedurals by making the crime and the criminals known to its audience in its opening

⁶¹ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, pp. 60-61.

⁶² Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, pp.126, 132.

⁶³ Skolnick and Fyfe, *Above the Law*, p. xi.

⁶⁴ Guest, *The Police Procedural Film*, pp. 170-202.

scene.⁶⁵ Miller Starkie, a ‘bookie’s runner’, is led into an ambush by Max Troy (Stacy Harris) and is ‘cut in half’ by four rounds fired from a sawn-off shotgun by Chester Davitt (Willard Sage). The remainder of the film is devoted to an account of the police investigation and its accompanying legal processes. Starkie’s known association with organised crime leads Chief Parker, who is referred to by name but never seen, to order a joint investigation by detectives from Homicide and from the Intelligence Division, led by Captain James Hamilton (Richard Boone). After a preliminary review of forensic information, Intelligence Division then reveals an impressive array of information about organised-crime associates which allows a swift identification of the leading suspects. Six men, including Troy and Davitt are summarily taken from their homes and interrogated at length by Sergeant Joe Friday (Jack Webb) and Officer Frank Smith (Ben Alexander). Although Friday is convinced of the men’s guilt and finds an eye-witness who can place Davitt at the scene, a Grand Jury finds insufficient evidence to indict the suspects after the witness changes his story to avoid retribution and the suspects use their rights under the Fifth Amendment to refuse to testify. Incensed by the Grand Jury’s verdict, Captain Hamilton orders a ‘bumper to bumper tail’ and Max Troy, in particular, is subjected to day-long harassment and innumerable friskings by Friday and his colleagues.

Although this overtly intrusive process may have been symbolically important, the progress of the investigation depends more crucially upon a more subtle form of surveillance, in the form of two listening devices. Through exposition, we learn that one of these has been planted by ‘the wire crew’ in the back office of the Red Spot Grill, a cocktail bar and restaurant owned by Troy. Another device is shown to be carried into the same premises in the handbag of under-cover police officer Grace Downey (Ann Robinson). This

⁶⁵ See, for example, *He Walked By Night* and *Crime Wave* (1954).

miniature recorder is clearly branded as a Protona Minifon, a product developed in West Germany in 1951 which was remarkable for its compactness and for its four-hour recording capacity.⁶⁶ These ‘bugs’ provide the police with vital pieces of information which allow them to close the case. From the fixed device they learn that gang bosses in Cleveland have murdered Davitt to ensure that he does not reveal the circumstances of Starkie’s killing, while Officer Downey’s under-cover work reveals that a box of shotgun shells has been dumped in a trash can behind the nightclub. The news of her husband’s death persuades a tearful Mrs. Davitt to lead the police to the sawn-off shotgun used in Starkie’s murder. Friday sets off to arrest Max Troy but learns that his prime suspect has been admitted to hospital. In an anti-climactic ending, Troy, who is portrayed throughout the film as suffering from a weak stomach, is pronounced dead from cancer shortly before the police arrive at his bedside.

Since one of Parker’s most-publicised objectives was to prevent Los Angeles from being overrun by mobsters from the East Coast, it was no surprise that *Dragnet* (1954) featured organised-crime associates as its villains. Although some well-known criminals, such as Bugsy Siegel and Mickey Cohen, enjoyed a celebrity life-style, gangsters in general were a section of the community with absolutely no overt public support and, as Joe Domanick has pointed out, scare-mongering over the impending take-over of the city by East Coast mobsters had been used as a ‘support-your-local police rallying cry in Los Angeles since the 1920s.’⁶⁷ Despite the obvious benefits of this type of posturing to Chiefs faced with budgetary constraints or political pressures, there is little doubt that, at the time

⁶⁶ The Minifon, a magnetic recorder which used a wire rather than a tape, is credited with being the inspiration behind the development of the Black Box flight recorder by Dr. David Warren. Found at <<http://www.vk2bv.org/radio/minifon.htm>> on 13 September 2010.

⁶⁷ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 156.

that Parker took office, the threat was real. The Kefauver Committee, created by the U.S. Senate to investigate organised gambling and racketeering, had used a series of hearings held across the United States to demonstrate the power of organised crime and, in the process, to embarrass F.B.I. Director J. Edgar Hoover, who had barely acknowledged the existence of the Mafia.⁶⁸ Kefauver had been granted access to the income tax records of suspects and, in a session held in Los Angeles in 1950, had used these powers to reveal the inconsistencies between local gangster Mickey Cohen's lavish life-style and his meagre tax payments. These embarrassments ultimately led to Cohen's conviction by a Federal Court on charges of tax evasion. According to John Buntin, shortly after Parker's appointment, a meeting of five major criminals was held in order to discuss 'how to divvy up the most lucrative rackets' in Los Angeles and how to maximize their political connections. Since Parker, who had been singled out for praise by Kefauver, was assumed to be immune to any form of pressure, they set their sights on the Mayor's office and planned to fund a campaign to recall Mayor Bowron.⁶⁹

Most accounts of Parker's term of office acknowledge his commitment to fighting organised crime and, in real life, as in *Dragnet* (1954), responsibility for this task lay with Intelligence Division, a unit under the command of Captain James E. Hamilton which, in 1952, employed thirty-six officers.⁷⁰ Warner Bros.' pre-release publicity described the unit as 'a super-secret branch of the Los Angeles police department never shown before in a filmed show of any kind' and claimed that Hamilton, who was credited as a technical advisor, was 'on the set for every moment of shooting and available for answering Webb's

⁶⁸ 'The Truth about Hoover', *Time*, v. 106, n. 25, 22 December 1975, p. 34.

⁶⁹ Buntin, *L.A. Noir*, pp. 162-63.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 201.

many questions'.⁷¹ In his autobiography, Daryl Gates, who took charge of Intelligence Division following Hamilton's retirement in 1963, recalls that, immediately after taking office, Parker 'took off after organized crime ... like a general attacking an enemy army' and insisted that 'Intelligence knew the precise whereabouts of every Mafia figure in Southern California.'⁷²

Although *Dragnet* (1954) provides a predictably detailed and authentic representation of the work of Intelligence Division in generating information on organised crime, its perspective upon the role of that Division is relatively narrow. The film makes only a fleeting reference to the work of its Airport Squad, a small group of officers with special expertise in recognising faces, who would screen arrivals at Los Angeles International Airport. Once identified, mobsters would be either strongly encouraged to leave the city immediately, or placed under immediate surveillance. Although the unit had a reputation for using extreme physical intimidation, this aspect of their behaviour went unrepresented in the cinema of the Fifties.⁷³ However, Intelligence Division did not confine its information-gathering activities to organised crime. While a small number of officers were dedicated to providing security for visiting dignitaries and heads of state, another unit within the Division was focused upon subversives, a term which, in 1954, generally referred to the 'Communist Fifth Columnists' whom Parker frequently attacked. However, there was also much speculation that Intelligence Division maintained extensive files on

⁷¹ Webb cited in Friedman, *Dragnet* File 651, HO 9_1251, 24 May 1954. Including Hamilton and Chief Parker, the names of fourteen L.A.P.D. officers and members of the District Attorney's office were used by characters in the film. For Parker's attitude towards organised crime see, Kramer, *William H. Parker and the thin blue line*, p. 60; Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 156 and Buntin, *L.A. Noir*, pp. 201-14.

⁷² Gates and Shah, *Chief*, pp. 82-3.

⁷³ *L.A. Confidential* includes a brief representation of this violent treatment of suspected mobsters.

political figures, rumours that were made more believable by Parker's directive that all intelligence files were the personal property of the Chief of Police and were thus protected from any external scrutiny, even by subpoena. Parker's successors would continue to see intelligence as vital and, by 1970, when Intelligence Division was replaced by a combination of Organized Crime Intelligence Division and Public Disorder Intelligence Division, a total of one hundred and eighty-eight officers were deployed in these two newly created units.⁷⁴

Dragnet (1954) takes aim at a range of constitutional safeguards which Chief Parker considered to be constraints upon police activity and thus sources of comfort to criminals. The inherent tension between the suspects' obvious guilt and the protection offered to all citizens by the law first arises when they choose to avoid self-incrimination before the Grand Jury by exercising their Fifth Amendment rights. Friday discovers six identical, typed versions of the requisite form of words which they have discarded before entering the courtroom and is openly disdainful of this manoeuvre. In a rhetorical question, he asks the District Attorney why the law 'always works for the guilty' and thus echoes the well-known tendency of HUAC to associate the act of 'pleading the Fifth' with guilt, an assumption which led to the derogatory appellation of 'Fifth Amendment Communist'. At the conclusion of the film, after learning of Troy's death, Friday tosses a crumpled piece of paper into the gutter and a symbolic parting-shot shows the dead gangster's Fifth Amendment wording being dissolved by the falling rain.

However, *Dragnet* (1954) makes its most direct contribution to discourses of law enforcement through its engagement with the highly controversial issue of electronic surveillance, in its separate but related forms: wiretapping, or the interception of telephone

⁷⁴ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, pp. 154-55.

calls, and ‘bugging’, the use of a concealed recording device in an area where criminal conversations were likely to take place. A combination of Federal Statutes and California law prevented official use of wiretapping and, despite the pleas of Parker and his fellow California police Chiefs that court-approved telephone intercepts should be legalised, the State legislature remained unmoved. Nevertheless, in its dramatisation of a Grand Jury hearing, the film uses Joe Friday to advance Parker’s arguments in favour of wiretapping. The detective presents a chart demonstrating a pattern of telephone calls between the accused which, in his opinion, provides circumstantial evidence of conspiracy to murder. Under questioning, he admits that he has no firm evidence of what was discussed during these calls but uses this weakness in his case to argue that the police should be allowed to tap the telephones of criminal suspects. Although Friday adds the caveat that such activity should require a court order, he reveals the breadth of powers which Parker was advocating when he suggests that permissible circumstances should include the arrival in Los Angeles of anyone known to have links with organised crime. Responding to the suggestion of a female juror that such powers would constitute an invasion of privacy and would allow the police to listen to anyone’s calls, he replies: ‘We would. If you’re talking murder’. When another juror suggests that legalisation of wiretapping would simply lead to criminal conversations moving out on to ‘every street corner’, Friday is quick to boast: ‘That’s all right. There’d be a cop on it!’

Despite the legal obstacles to wiretapping, both in real life and in *Dragnet*, the police had a viable alternative. Although a Supreme Court ruling in 1914 had forbidden courts to admit evidence which had been improperly obtained, this ‘exclusionary rule’ was

only applied to the actions of Federal agencies.⁷⁵ So far as state courts were concerned, in the words of John Buntin, ‘the proof was in the pudding’ and evidence from most sources was considered admissible, provided that it established guilt.⁷⁶ Certainly, Chief Parker had no doubt that the discovery of evidence of criminal activity should override any constitutional rights which may be invoked. Thus in Los Angeles, although the police were not allowed to tap phones, there was no restriction upon their ability to place recording devices, normally dictographs, in any area where they believed evidence of criminality might be obtained. From 1947 to 1949, the L.A.P.D. had successfully bugged the home of Micky Cohen and obtained information which was allegedly used by corrupt police officers to obtain payoffs from the famous gangster.⁷⁷ The L.A.P.D. was also in the habit of using dictographs for criminal investigations, without any form of warrant, by the simple approach of breaking into homes and businesses and installing the easily concealed devices, often adjacent to telephones. The notion that such devices were ‘stand-alone’ recorders which did not involve wiretapping was generally accepted by the courts.

However, in February 1954, a ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court changed the position quite radically. Patrick Irvine, a bookmaker, had been arrested by the Long Beach Police Department and convicted based upon evidence obtained from two recording devices which had been placed in his home. Although the court ruled that the police had entered his home illegally and had thus breached his Fourth Amendment rights to be free from ‘unreasonable search and seizure’, it nevertheless refused to set aside the verdict, on the well-established grounds that rules governing the exclusion of such evidence only applied to Federal officers. Crucially, however, the justices also ruled that any police

⁷⁵ *Weeks v. United States*, 232 U.S. 383 (1914).

⁷⁶ Buntin, *L.A. Noir*, p. 208.

⁷⁷ ‘Hidden Microphones Hear Cohen Secrets’, *Los Angeles Times*, 16 August 1949, p. 1.

officer who wilfully deprived a person of this federal right was himself liable for criminal prosecution, while describing dictographs as ‘frightening instruments of surveillance and invasion of privacy’.⁷⁸

Parker was already under local pressure on the issue. In 1951, A.L. Wirin, an attorney representing the Southern California Civil Liberties Union, had filed suit to prevent the L.A.P.D. from spending public money on the illegal installation of dictographs and at least two city councilmen had accused the L.A.P.D. of illegal wiretapping. According to John Buntin, the decision to allow Jack Webb to use a feature-length story from the files of Intelligence Division for *Dragnet* (1954) was based upon Parker’s desire to promote public support for a range of intrusive surveillance techniques, including the use of dictographs.⁷⁹ In July 1954, speaking in the Superior Court of Los Angeles, Parker attempted to provide a context for his own interpretation of the constitution: ‘I believe that it was never intended by our Founding Fathers that the criminal cartels of our nation should be granted a Yalu River sanctuary within the vast telegraphic and telephonic communications network of the United States within which to plan and transact their illegal activities with impunity.’⁸⁰

Despite Parker’s efforts, on the very day that the film was released, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that, in the opinion of State Attorney General Edmund Brown, police officers should be ‘subject to civil and criminal liability if they break into private premises

⁷⁸ *Irvine v. California*, 347 US 128 (1954), cited in Buntin, *L.A. Noir*, p. 208.

⁷⁹ Buntin, *L.A. Noir*, p. 212.

⁸⁰ ‘Police wire tapping test case to begin today’, *Daily News* (Los Angeles), 8 July 1954, no page reference provided, *Dragnet* Clippings File, Margaret Herrick Library. Parker’s testimony is also cited in Buntin, *L.A. Noir*, p. 210. The Yalu was the entry point for Chinese troops into the Korean war zone.

to install Dictograph or wire-tapping equipment for the purpose of obtaining evidence.’⁸¹ Then, in April 1955, the Supreme Court of California opted to apply the exclusionary rule to local police officers and overturned a conviction which had been based on dictograph recordings. By disguising an officer as a termite inspector, Intelligence Division had gained entry to the home of Charlie Cahan, a notorious bookmaker, and had installed a concealed dictograph. Although the recordings secured an initial conviction, the verdict was eventually overturned by the state Supreme Court in a judgement which also condemned the ‘lawless activities of law enforcement’ and ruled that, henceforth, all evidence improperly obtained would be disregarded.⁸² By the early 1960s, even a protagonist as determined as Parker must have realised that he was fighting a losing battle. In 1961, the United States Supreme Court extended the exclusionary rule to cover the activities of all state police forces and, in 1963, disallowed the use of any evidence obtained through illegal search and seizure.⁸³

If Parker hoped that *Dragnet* (1954) might increase public support for his perspectives on electronic surveillance in particular and the constraints of the justice system in general, there was little comfort to be found in the views of film critics, whether in Los Angeles or elsewhere, most of whom ignored the issue. The *Daily News* reported that, after the ‘grisly murder’, the film was mainly concerned with ‘the usual routine of police investigation.’⁸⁴ *Hollywood Citizen-News* highlighted the ‘usual leg work’ that takes up the

⁸¹ ‘Police Warned on Secret Wire Taps’, *Los Angeles Times*, 4 September 1954, p. A1.

⁸² *People v. Cahan*, 44 Cal.2d 434 (1955), cited in Buntin, *L.A.Noir*, p. 213. The Cahan case was dramatised in an episode of *Dragnet* on television which, uniquely, did not end with a conviction (Cannon, *Official Negligence*, p. 62).

⁸³ *Mapp v. Ohio*, 367 U.S. 643 (1961) and *Fahy v. Connecticut*, 375 US 85 (1963), cited in Kramer, *William H. Parker and the Thin Blue Line*, p. 206.

⁸⁴ Howard McClay, ‘*Dragnet* In Movie Bow’, *Daily News*, 2 September 1954, L.A.P.D. Scrapbooks.

major portion of the film.’⁸⁵ The *Los Angeles Examiner* found the film generally entertaining even though Webb’s ‘adherence to ordinary, routine police methods’ proved to be ‘tedious now and again’.⁸⁶ The *Los Angeles Times* described ‘the undeniable fascination in the workings of the patient police’ and particularly mentioned the detailed expositions of the ‘bumper to bumper tail’, the electronic surveillance device and the Grand Jury investigation.⁸⁷

However, at least two commentators were unimpressed by *Dragnet*’s exposition of policing. Film historian Arthur Knight, writing in the *Saturday Review*, described Friday as ‘a grimly righteous man’ and disapproved of his ‘glib arguments for the removal of ... Constitutional obstacles in the way of good policemen.’ In Knight’s opinion, Friday’s approach ‘might have come directly out of gangland’s own handbook’ and he was one of several critics who expressed concern about the ‘bumper to bumper tail’, accusing Friday of humiliating the suspects through his ‘bullyragging’.⁸⁸ The *Herald Express* also suggested that many would have considered the approach to be ‘sheer harassment’ and, in the same article, quoted Chief Parker, a man who was rarely reluctant to support harsh measures against known criminals, as suggesting that, in practice, his department would have tailed the suspect by the ‘arm’s length method’.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Wylie Williams, ‘*Dragnet* Movie Surpasses TV Acclaim, as Film Debuts’, *Hollywood Citizen-News*, 2 September 1954, L.A.P.D. Scrapbooks, Los Angeles City Clerk’s Office, Records Management Division, C. Erwin Piper Technical Center, Los Angeles, CA.

⁸⁶ Sara Hamilton, ‘*Dragnet* Film Blazes Trail’, *Los Angeles Examiner*, 2 September 1954, L.A.P.D. Scrapbooks.

⁸⁷ Philip K. Scheuer, ‘Feature *Dragnet* Like TV’, *Los Angeles Times*, 2 September 1954, p. B9.

⁸⁸ Arthur Knight, ‘Cheez It, the Cops!’, *Saturday Review*, 11 September 1954, p. 44. Knight’s pioneering work, *The Liveliest Art: A Panoramic History of the Movies* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), became a standard text for the study of film history.

⁸⁹ William Mooring, ‘Chief Gives Opinion On “Bad Cop” Films’, *Los Angeles Herald Evening Express*, 22 October 1954, p. 10, L.A.P.D. Scrapbooks.

Dragnet is also notable for its ground-breaking portrayal of a female police officer, working under-cover. Officer Grace Downey, a glamorous redhead, described in Warner Brothers' pre-release publicity as 'a real beauty' but one who was 'not too pretty to play a policewoman', is assigned to the Red Spot Grill where, according to Friday she will be mingling with the kind of women 'who find it hard to hold on to an address'.⁹⁰ Downey's femininity is emphasised through her concern for her appearance when, having been briefed on her assignment, she informs Friday that she is likely to be late, since she needs to get a 'Marcel', a permanent wave, in order to look her best. The detectives' attitudes towards their female colleague range between avuncular and patronising, with Smith providing her with detailed advice on her choice of dress for the assignment and Friday stating his concern that she understands the dangers involved and his hope that she will survive the undercover work to 'make sergeant one day'.

The forced nature of these exchanges may reflect that fact that detectives of the time would have minimal experience of working with female officers. Although the appointment of Alice Stebbins Wells in 1910 had made the L.A.P.D. the first force in the country to employ a police-woman, by the Fifties less than one percent of sworn officers were female, a statistic which would remain largely unchanged until 1970. Janis Appier has ascribed this paucity of female officers to the L.A.P.D.'s philosophical attachment to the 'war on crime' which, in her opinion, reinforced a 'working class male sub-culture'. Predictably, the film's portrayal of the police-woman is technically correct. When in uniform, she wears a police jacket, skirt and hat and she carries her gun and handcuffs in a small black shoulder bag. In the L.A.P.D. in 1954, women definitely did not wear trousers, and the idea of them carrying

⁹⁰ Friedman, *Dragnet* File, H09_1251, undated, U.S.C. Warner Brothers Archives.

a gun in plain view was not acceptable. Nor, at that time, were they allowed to arrest male suspects.⁹¹

Despite its obsession with authenticity, *Dragnet* (1954), in common with almost all other police procedurals of its era, portrayed Los Angeles as an entirely white community, and made no reference to the city's Latino and African American populations or to the often hostile relationships between those communities and the L.A.P.D. Although critical reception of the film glossed over this absence, at least one interested citizen felt sufficiently concerned to express his concern directly to the president of Warner Bros. In a letter professing enthusiastic support for Jack Webb, the correspondent noted that anyone who visited Los Angeles could not help but notice the ubiquity of people of colour and argued that their absence from the screen was striking and inauthentic: 'I have yet to see ... ONE BLACK FACE ... OR ONE MINORITY!'⁹² Although there is no evidence in the archive of any reply to this letter, the studio could have argued with some justification that, at least in the case of *Dragnet* (1954), its representations of Intelligence Division and of the targets of its investigation were entirely authentic. Minority officers, who comprised approximately ten percent of the L.A.P.D., were generally deployed within their own communities, either as patrolmen or as investigative officers in plain clothes. Since, in the Fifties, African Americans and Latinos were seldom associated with organised crime and since Intelligence Division, as an elite unit, was an unlikely destination for minority officers, for once the film-makers had a convenient explanation for the absence of people of colour from the screen.

⁹¹ Appier, *Policing Women*, pp.1, 165-68.

⁹² C.A. Simmons, letter to H.M. Warner, 29 September 1954, *Dragnet* File 2954, U.S.C. Warner Bros. Archives.

On 11 October 1956, the television series *Dragnet* (1957-1961) broke new ground with the appearance of two African American actors as ‘guest-leads’ in an episode entitled ‘The Big Missus’.⁹³ In the cinema, throughout the late-1950s and 1960s, African American actors became increasingly evident, especially Sidney Poitier who, by 1968, was one of Hollywood’s most recognisable and best-paid stars.⁹⁴ Despite these advances, it would be 1971 before cinema audiences were exposed to representations of the long-standing tensions between the L.A.P.D. and the minority communities of Los Angeles. By that time, not only had the city experienced a major racial disturbance but significant changes had occurred in American society, politics and culture and in the composition and regulation of the film industry. Future filmic representations of the L.A.P.D. and of Los Angeles would be far removed from the reassuringly upright Joe Friday and the apparently white city which he policed.

⁹³ Michael J. Hayde, *My Name’s Friday: The Unauthorized but True Story of ‘Dragnet’ and the Films of Jack Webb* (Nashville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2001), pp. 119-20.

⁹⁴ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 75.

III. S.W.A.T., C.R.A.S.H.

1. Introduction

More white people have been fatally shot by police officers last year than black people ... so we don't discriminate!

L.A.P.D. Chief Ed Davis, speaking in 1975.¹

Our aim was ... to make arrests with as little loss of life as possible. Except when you find out you are dealing with really bad people. Then you reach a point when you finally say to your officers, 'Hey, if those sons-a-bitches fire, kill 'em.'

L.A.P.D. Chief Daryl Gates.²

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, filmic representation of crime and policing in Los Angeles had remained an almost exclusively white affair. While cinema screens carried reassuring images of detectives using teamwork and technology to bring criminals to justice, the long-standing tensions between the L.A.P.D. and the minority communities of the city, which warranted extensive coverage in both written and broadcast news media, were ignored by film-makers. However, after a dearth of locally based police movies in the 1960s, cinematic representations of L.A.P.D. officers were transformed in the 1970s by the vision of two very different individuals: an African American maverick who produced the first independent black film to enjoy significant commercial success and a long-serving L.A.P.D. officer turned novelist, whose work drove major changes in both literary and cinematic perceptions of the nature of police work. From contrasting perspectives, these men created or inspired films which acknowledged the existence of the African American and Latino communities of the inner city and engaged directly with issues arising from the often adversarial relationships between these people of colour and a predominantly white L.A.P.D.

¹ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 222.

² Gates and Shah, *Chief*, p. 158, discussing the Symbionese Liberation Army in 1974.

The legacy of Chief Parker

On the evening of Saturday 16 July 1966, the prospect of radical changes in cinematic representations of the L.A.P.D. would have been far from the mind of Chief William Parker, who was being feted at a reunion of the Second Marine Division Association. Parker was presented with an award in gratitude for his service to the community and, while the applause which marked the end of his acceptance speech was still ringing around the room, he collapsed with a heart attack and died at the scene. Los Angeles designated the day of his funeral as a public holiday, allowing thousands of mourners to pay their respects as his cortege passed through the streets, while, in the words of Joe Domanick, the *Los Angeles Times* reacted ‘as if he’d been a sitting head of state’, with four consecutive days of front-page coverage.³ In the eyes of the white community, even the bloodshed and destruction of the Watts riot had failed to tarnish Parker’s reputation and his influence on the policing of Los Angeles would extend well beyond the grave. For most of the remaining years of the century, the model of policing which he had developed in the Fifties would continue to influence the operations of the L.A.P.D. The enduring quality of his legacy was based upon the political independence which he had nurtured, the organisation which he had designed, the behavioural ethos of ‘command and control’ which he had fostered and, crucially, upon the careers of two of his protégés who would lead the L.A.P.D. for twenty-two of the next twenty-six years. Ed Davis, who served as Chief from 1968 until 1976, had been hand-picked by Parker to write the L.A.P.D. manual, a key building-block of his reforms and a powerful symbol of police

³ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 195.

professionalisation in practice. Daryl Gates, who led the force from 1978 until 1992, had been mentored by Parker in the early stages of his career after serving as his personal driver and bodyguard.

The reverence for Parker within the white community stood in sharp contrast to the hatred of the Chief exhibited by many African Americans. His term of office was notorious for persistent allegations of racism, harassment and brutality, made against the L.A.P.D. by minorities, which reached a peak in the aftermath of the Watts Riot of 1965. Peter J. Boyer, in an article which is mostly devoted to police transgressions in the 1990s, has argued that Watts should have been a major turning-point for the L.A.P.D., ‘shattering its illusion of a dreamy, well-ordered monochromatic Los Angeles’ and initiating a re-appraisal of its policing methods and its relationship with minority communities.⁴ However, as the man who had spent most of the previous sixteen years shaping both the organisation and the ethos of the modern L.A.P.D., Parker was never likely to contemplate such a fundamental change in direction. Speaking on local television shortly after the riots he argued that the remedy for events like Watts was even-stronger doses of the same medicine: ‘It is estimated that by 1970, forty-five percent of the metropolitan area of Los Angeles will be Negro ... you’re going to have to get in and support a strong police department. If you don’t, come 1970, God help you.’⁵ On the day following his funeral, in marked contrast to the saturation coverage in the white-owned media, the black-owned *Los Angeles Sentinel* devoted just one

⁴ Boyer, ‘Bad Cops’, p. 64.

⁵ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 185. By 1970, African Americans comprised only seventeen percent of the city’s population.

article to Parker, a piece largely concerned with speculation over the policies to be adopted by his eventual successor.⁶

For many years, Parker himself had been the focus of African American concerns, a point regularly emphasised by local black newspapers and even confirmed by the report of the commission established by the Governor of California to review Watts, which was widely considered as exonerating the Chief from any blame for the riot: ‘He is a man distrusted by most Negroes and they carefully analyze for possible anti-Negro meaning almost every action he takes and every statement he makes. Many Negroes feel that he carries a deep hatred of the Negro community.’⁷ This atmosphere of distrust was exemplified by an article in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, which attributed the riot to: ‘Bitter resentment in minority areas against ... Parker and his ... apparently antagonistic attitudes.’ The same article condemned Parker for his habit of referring to the black community as ‘Negra people’, a phrase more commonly associated with Southern racism, and alleged that: ‘our masses of law-abiding citizens are convinced that white policemen do not treat them with the same courtesy and respect that is accorded law-abiding citizens in the white community.’⁸ On this same subject, the McCone Commission echoed the newspaper’s viewpoint: ‘The bitter criticism we have heard evidences a deep and longstanding schism between a substantial portion of the Negro community and the Police Department. "Police brutality" has been the recurring charge. One witness after another has recounted instances

⁶ ‘Community Awaits Policy Of Parker’s Successor’, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 21 July 1966, p. A1.

⁷ *The Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots*, 2 December 1965, found at <<http://www.usc.edu/libraries/archives/cityinstress/mccone/contents.html>> on 7 September 2007. The Commission was chaired by former C.I.A. Director John McCone and, henceforth, is referred to as the McCone Commission.

⁸ ‘Why The Rioting’, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 19 August 1965, p. 6A.

in which, in their opinion, the police have used excessive force or have been disrespectful and abusive in their language or manner.’⁹

Despite these accusations, when confronted with allegations of police harassment of African Americans, Parker would invariably claim that police arrested a higher proportion of ‘negroes’ simply because they committed more crimes than did other racial groups. A further extract from the Commission report indicates that its members, at least partially, accepted Parker’s point of view: ‘Although the criminal element among the Negroes is only a small fraction of the Negro population, over half of all crimes of violence committed in the City of Los Angeles are committed by Negroes, and the great majority of the victims of these crimes are Negroes. Thus, the police, in their effort to suppress crime, are doing so to protect the entire community, including the Negro community.’¹⁰ Nevertheless, African Americans continued to claim that police harassment itself caused the number of arrests to be increased and thus distorted the crime statistics. This argument would continue to be a defining issue in police-community relations in Los Angeles for the remaining decades of the twentieth century. Its persistence is linked to the failure of Parker’s successors to modify two aspects of his legacy: the ethos of command and control and the continuing dominance of white officers in the ranks of the L.A.P.D.

Although Parker’s death provided a perfect opportunity for local politicians to force the L.A.P.D. to come to terms with the changing demographics of the city and the increasing aspirations of minority communities, it would be many years before that nettle would be grasped. In the immediate aftermath of Watts, heightened concern among the white community about law and order persuaded civic leaders that hostility towards the

⁹ *The Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots*, 2 December 1965.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

L.A.P.D. was likely to result in defeat at the ballot-box.¹¹ Mayor Sam Yorty, himself the subject of much post-Watts criticism for his perceived failings in inner-city economic and social policies, managed to hold on to power in the 1969 election, partly by exploiting fears that the L.A.P.D. would refuse to co-operate with his opponent, African American Tom Bradley.¹² In the absence of any politically inspired mandate for police reform, the dividing lines of race and spatiality and the conflicts between the L.A.P.D. and the African American community became even more starkly delineated, as black militancy became more influential and as ‘the most politically powerful institution in the government of Los Angeles’ adopted a bunker mentality.¹³

Chiefs Tom Reddin (1966-68) and Ed Davis (1969-1978)

Parker’s immediate successor, former Deputy Chief Tom Reddin, was only in power for two years and, although he demonstrated more willingness than his predecessor to recognise the concerns of minority communities, he also presided over a significant expansion in the L.A.P.D.’s fleet of helicopters, a form of transportation which provided an efficient solution to the problems of rapid response over a sprawling metropolis but which would be seized upon by a variety of film-makers as an icon of police surveillance.¹⁴

Reddin also oversaw the creation of the Special Weapons And Tactics Squad (S.W.A.T.),

¹¹ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, pp. 214-19.

¹² Woods, *The Police in Los Angeles*, p. 248.

¹³ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 251.

¹⁴ African American directors have led the way in using either the sight or the sound of a helicopter as a signifier of an intrusive L.A.P.D. presence. Notable examples include Melvin Van Peebles’ *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, Haile Gereima’s *Bush Mama* and John Singleton’s *Boyz N the Hood*. White directors who have used the same approach include Lawrence Kasdan in *Grand Canyon* (1991) and Kathryn Bigelow in *Strange Days*.

the most overt manifestation of para-military policing yet seen in Los Angeles. In 1969, he was succeeded by Ed Davis, an outspoken but politically astute Chief who, after eight years running the L.A.P.D., would become a State Senator. Davis was a controversial figure, a stalwart opponent of gun-control, a strident critic of homosexuality and, in the opinion of Gerald Woods, a leader whose ‘provocative bombast’ set a dangerous example to his officers. Davis shared his predecessor’s enthusiasm for initiatives such as the Basic Car Plan, an early form of community policing, but was also a strong and consistent defender of the ethos of command and control and of his officers’ need to use deadly force. Although shooting incidents remained commonplace, Davis consistently resisted any pressure to have them entered on officers’ personal files and few officers were punished. From 1975 to 1977, L.A.P.D. officers shot and killed ninety-three suspects, a death toll reflected in a Police Commission review of shooting policy in 1977 which re-emphasised that police actions should be guided by the ‘value of human life’ rather than concern for property.¹⁵ Davis’ term of office was also characterised by a continuation of the L.A.P.D.’s investment in its helicopter fleet and, most significantly, by an extension of its specialised units.

The efforts of both Reddin and Davis to move in the direction of community policing were hampered, not only by the continuing pattern of officer-involved shootings, but by another aspect of Chief Parker’s legacy: an organisational design which deliberately minimised personal connections between L.A.P.D. officers and the communities they served.¹⁶ In the aftermath of Watts, this separation between police and community was widened by an increased emphasis on specialised units, operating with a narrow operational brief but with city-wide responsibility. The evolution of these units is best exemplified by

¹⁵ Woods, *The Police in Los Angeles*, pp. 250-52.

¹⁶ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 12.

the history of Metro Division, which originally comprised a handful of officers, mainly charged with maintaining public order during labour disputes. Their numbers, by 1967, had been expanded to a much larger force which was used to target specific criminal activity. Daryl Gates, who was their commander at the time, oversaw their formation into ‘sixteen military-type squads’ and, later that same year, co-opted into the division the L.A.P.D.’s sixty expert marksmen. Within Metro, this group quickly evolved into S.W.A.T., a unit designed to respond to exceptional challenges to public safety, identified by an acronym which derived from Gates’ suggested title of Special Weapons Attack Teams. Hastily rebranded by then-Deputy Chief Davis as Special Weapons And Tactics, S.W.A.T. was soon involved in a series of highly publicised operations. Its first serious deployment occurred in December 1969, when it laid siege to a building occupied by the local branch of the Black Panthers, resulting in what the *Los Angeles Times* describes as ‘a mini-war that lasted nearly five hours’, in which both sides exchanged gun fire while the Panthers threw Molotov cocktails and the L.A.P.D. fired canisters of tear-gas. Three officers and six militants were wounded and the operation resulted in the confiscation of a large number of guns which the L.A.P.D. alleged had been stockpiled for the express purpose of attacking police officers. Thirteen Panthers were subsequently charged with conspiracy to commit murder although, after a seven-month trial, the nine convictions secured were on lesser charges of conspiracy to possess contraband weapons.¹⁷ The absence of fatalities in the Panther shoot-out was fortuitous since Gates later claimed that, shortly before the militants surrendered, he was preparing to authorise the use of a grenade launcher which, with the approval of the Pentagon, had been borrowed from the Marine Corps.¹⁸

¹⁷ ‘Verdict On The Panther Raid’, *Los Angeles Times*, 26 December 1971, p. G5.

¹⁸ Gates and Shah, *Chief*, pp. 139-40.

Not so fortunate however, were six members of the Symbionese Liberation Army (S.L.A.), a revolutionary group which had gained notoriety through a series of violent incidents and by the abduction and conversion to their cause of Patty Hearst, the press-heiress and grand-daughter of William Randolph Hearst. Cornered by S.W.A.T. in a Los Angeles house in 1974, six S.L.A. members died after more than nine thousand rounds of ammunition had been fired and a nationally televised confrontation ended with the house in flames.¹⁹ The S.L.A. siege gave S.W.A.T. a national and international reputation and inspired many other police forces to create similar units. In Gates' words: 'That night, SWAT became a household name throughout the world.'²⁰ By the time that Los Angeles hosted the 1984 Olympics, S.W.A.T. had become widely recognised as the first line of defence against the threat of terrorist attack and was equipped with fully-automatic weapons.

The outstanding success of S.W.A.T. helped persuade Davis of the effectiveness of specialised units and, in 1970, he formalised the existence of the L.A.P.D.'s anti-subversive activities through the creation of the Public Disorder Intelligence Division. He then determined that a similarly focused approach would strengthen the L.A.P.D.'s response to the next major threat to law and order in the city: the rise of African American street gangs. Although Hispanic gangs had been present in Los Angeles for many years, their operations were largely confined to closely defined territorial rivalries within the *barrios* of East Los Angeles. The development of African American gangs was more loosely aligned with educational districts and was partly driven by a response to white violence in high-schools

¹⁹ Gates and Shah, *Chief*, pp. 130-31. Until the corpses were forensically identified, Gates feared that Patty Hearst was among the dead.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 159.

as education became increasingly integrated after World War II.²¹ By the end of the 1960s, although black gangs were well-established, their activities were largely obscured by the relatively high profile of militant black activism. However, Mike Davis has argued that, in the 1970s, after pressure from the L.A.P.D. and the F.B.I. resulted in the elimination of the Black Panthers as a political force in Los Angeles, the subsequent vacuum in the African American community was partially filled by the emergence of street-gangs, in the form of the Crips and their deadly rivals, the Bloods.²² In response to increasing concerns over the role of gangs, in the mid-1970s the L.A.P.D. created Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (C.R.A.S.H.), a unit specifically targeted against gang-violence which, more than twenty years later, would be at the heart of the allegations of widespread police corruption in the Rampart scandal.

Although white men continued to lead the L.A.P.D., Los Angeles became the second major American city to elect a black Mayor when Tom Bradley was victorious in the 1973 election. Bradley's candidacy had enjoyed the solid support of the African American community but, recognising that his victory had only been made possible by the support of white liberals, the new Mayor chose to emulate his predecessor in avoiding any public confrontations with Chief Davis. In 1978, when Bradley was in his second term, he ignored an even better opportunity to challenge the status quo when the selection process to replace Davis resulted in the promotion of Assistant Chief Daryl Gates, a man described at the time by one Police Commission member as 'a police bureaucrat, someone who totally

²¹ Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 293.

²² *Ibid*, p. 298.

reflected the status quo, a Bill Parker product.²³ Free from any serious political challenge and with its leadership firmly in the hands of Parker loyalists, L.A.P.D. demographics remained relatively stable at a time when the racial and ethnic composition of Los Angeles was being transformed. From 1970 to 1980, within a city population which grew steadily at five percent per annum, whites declined proportionately from sixty percent to forty-eight percent, Latinos grew from eighteen percent to twenty-seven percent and African Americans remained stable at seventeen percent.²⁴ Within the same period, the number of L.A.P.D. officers who were African American increased from five percent to six percent, while Latinos rose from six percent to eleven percent and the number of females remained stable at less than three percent of the force. More significant improvements in diversity would not begin until 1980, when two Consent Decrees required the L.A.P.D. to pursue much more aggressive targets in its recruitment of minorities and women.²⁵

Social and cultural change

While the leadership, demographics and operations of the L.A.P.D. continued to reflect a style of policing which had been developed in the 1950s, American society was experiencing unprecedented rates of racial, political, economic and cultural change. Despite significant progress in civil rights legislation, younger African American activists were increasingly radical and, in 1966, both the Congress For Racial Equality (C.O.R.E.) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (S.N.C.C), organisations which had

²³ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 253. Bradley would have ample time to reflect on the wisdom of Gates' appointment since the new Chief and the second-term Mayor would enter an uneasy working relationship which would, somehow, endure until 1992.

²⁴ *City of Los Angeles Census 2000*.

²⁵ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 292.

previously followed the non-violent, integrationist and multi-racial approach championed by Martin Luther King, became more aligned with the teachings of Malcolm X, arguing for racial separatism and Black Power ‘by any means necessary’.²⁶ Black Power was an influential, if imprecise concept, which not only encouraged racial pride but which also led to the establishment of community groups, institutions, educational programmes and political campaigns. Although it was sufficiently broadly defined to be embraced by both black businessmen and by revolutionaries, for many white Americans it was symbolised by the emergence of extremist groups, such as the Black Panthers, and by the iconic, black-gloved salutes of John Carlos and Tommy Smith at the 1968 Olympics. Beginning in Watts in 1965, U.S. cities suffered a succession of violent racial disturbances, culminating in the ‘black uprisings’ in ‘the ghettos of a hundred cities’ which followed the assassination of Dr. King in 1968.²⁷ Protests against the war in Vietnam became more influential, and more violent, as the hostilities intensified and the draft deepened.

American cultural values were also changing as the baby-boomers came of age and as the growing influence of a more youthful population coincided with the more permissive attitudes of a generation linked with Sex, Drugs and Rock n’ Roll. Pre-marital sex and co-habitation increased while the divorce rate went up and the birth rate declined. Women’s control over their reproductive systems, which had been significantly enhanced by the introduction of the Pill in 1960, was further strengthened in 1973 when the Supreme Court ruled that the laws used by many states to restrict abortion were unconstitutional.²⁸ An

²⁶ Boyer, *et al* (eds.), *The Enduring Vision*, p. 892.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 891.

²⁸ *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973), cited in Boyer, *et al* (eds.), *The Enduring Vision*, p. 913.

increasing number of young women became involved in political protest while the feminist movement progressed from the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, to the formation of the National Organization for Women in 1966, and the Women's Strike for Equality in 1970. In 1969 the Stonewall Riots in Greenwich Village signalled the beginning of Gay Liberation. In this rapidly-evolving environment, censorship was much less restrictive and playwrights, film-makers, novelists and editors were able to produce much more explicit representations of sex, violence and racial conflict.

Change in the cinema

These significant shifts in attitude rapidly undermined the validity of the Production Code which, for three decades, had provided self-regulatory censorship for American cinema. In 1968 it was replaced by the Motion Picture Association of America (M.P.A.A) ratings system which was far more lenient in its treatment of most subjects, especially sex, violence and profanity. In this more liberal environment, the conservative representations of police officers that had typified the police procedurals of the 1940s and 1950s were replaced by a much wider range of characterisations. The first indications of this change came with the arrival of the vigilante detective film, a sub-genre firmly based in San Francisco, the city perhaps most associated with the liberalisation of American society. In *Bullitt* (1966), Steve McQueen played a modern incarnation of the detective as a man willing to defy pressure from his superiors and from local politicians in his individual pursuit of justice. Bullitt's life-style, clothing and musical tastes, combined with McQueen's ultra-cool *persona*, also marked what Brian Baker has described as the arrival of the cop as hipster. However, in Don Siegel's *Dirty Harry* (1971), Clint Eastwood re-

invented the urban policeman as western hero, a man dedicated to his own ideas of law and order and impervious to those forces of liberalism and bureaucracy which he saw as preventing him from bringing criminals to justice. In the original movie and its sequels, Eastwood took the role of vigilante cop to new extremes, representing a right-wing fantasy of law and order which in Baker's view served as a cultural indicator of 'the end of the Sixties'.²⁹ The cinematic policing of New York City was also transformed, first by the unorthodox behaviour of 'Popeye' Doyle (Gene Hackman) in *The French Connection* (1971) and subsequently by the corrupt police officers on display in Sidney Lumet's *Serpico* (1973).

So far as Los Angeles was concerned, all the paradigms associated with its cinematic policing were shattered by the 1971 release of Melvin Van Peebles' sensational film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. Viewed for the first time from the perspective of an independent, African American director, patrolmen, detectives and senior officers were portrayed as racist, brutal and corrupt men who dispensed their own version of justice while treating the law and the black community with contempt. Although the film was billed as 'Starring The Black Community', it included a significant supporting role for the L.A.P.D. as a brutal agency of white oppression, whose corrupt and murderous activities were defeated by the film's eponymous hero, the 'bad-ass nigger' who was 'coming to collect some dues.' Flaunting the hyper-sexuality of a black man who killed two police officers and got away with it, and produced within less than three weeks on a shoe-string budget, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* was a huge commercial success which alerted Hollywood to the economic potential of black audiences. None of the popular 'blaxploitation' movies, which were released in its wake, were to tackle policing in Los

²⁹ Baker, *Masculinity in Fiction and Film*, pp. 89, 91.

Angeles but, in 1976, Haile Gerima provided another highly-critical African American perspective on the L.A.P.D. in *Bush Mama*, a powerful film but one whose exposure was largely restricted to universities and to patrons of art-house cinemas.

While Van Peebles' iconoclastic influence was being felt in the cinema, conventional literary descriptions of American policing were being transformed by the writings of a very different individual. The informed realism which characterises the works of Joseph Wambaugh was derived from his own experiences as an L.A.P.D. patrolman and sergeant. Whereas previous police dramas had largely concentrated on the physical dangers of the profession, Wambaugh elected to highlight the psychological pressures which police officers endure as they negotiate the interfaces between the dangers of the street, the bureaucracy of the police force and the constraints of the legal system. Alcoholism, marital stress and suicide, both actual and contemplated, are consistent themes as Wambaugh's officers struggle, in Robert Reiner's words, 'to maintain integrity and decency in an often savage and amoral world.'³⁰ His police novels are often based upon a narrative form which involves an ensemble of characters and multiple story-lines and have been widely acknowledged as the inspiration for highly successful television series such as *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987) and *NYPD Blue* (1993-2005). As recently as 2009, *Variety*'s review of *Southland*, a new series featuring L.A.P.D. officers, described the episode as having 'a touch of Joseph Wambaugh'.³¹

³⁰ Robert Reiner, 'Keystone to Kojak: The Hollywood Cop', in Philip Davies and Brian Neve (eds.), *Cinema Politics and Society in America* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 215.

³¹ William Marling, 'Joseph Wambaugh' found at <<http://www.detnovel.com/Wambaugh.html>> on 12 May 2008; Brian Lowry, "'Crackling Southland tales', *Variety*, vol. 414, no. 8, 6-12 April 2009, p. 23.

By 1972, when Richard Fleischer's adaptation of Wambaugh's first novel, *The New Centurions*, was released, even in Hollywood movies, police officers could no longer expect to be portrayed as paragons of virtue. Although Wambaugh's work is sympathetic towards the police in general, and to front-line officers in particular, his characters demonstrate a wider range of behaviours than those on display in earlier cinematic representations of the L.A.P.D. or of any other American police force. As a result, *The New Centurions* and Robert Aldrich's *The Choirboys* marked several new departures in the way that Hollywood represented the L.A.P.D. on screen. These movies, which made Los Angeles in the Seventies the focal point of cinematic insights into the work and lives of uniformed police officers, were among the first films to reveal the challenges faced by a still-overwhelmingly white L.A.P.D. in the policing of minority areas and in the integration of minorities into their ranks. African American officers became visible on screen and a Latino officer featured in a significant supporting role. The films also made explicit the nature of police work in the area of sexually-related offences, including the increasingly controversial use of public indecency laws to prosecute homosexuals.

Although *The New Centurions* and *The Choirboys* received little critical acclaim and produced generally disappointing results at the box-office, each film contributed to discourses of law enforcement by engaging with contemporary issues which previous Hollywood movies had avoided. Wambaugh's background as a police officer, coupled with the conservatism of Hollywood, made it unlikely that any adaptation of his work would reflect the overt notion of the L.A.P.D. as agents of white racism which characterised the films of Van Peebles and Gerima. Nevertheless, contemporary audiences could easily identify the underlying tensions between the white police force and the minority communities of Los Angeles, while the behaviour of the on-screen officers reflected many

of the shortcomings identified by the McCone Commission in 1965 and carried echoes of more recent controversies.

Most successful police movies in the Seventies were based upon the extraordinary exploits of an individual detective, such as Popeye Doyle or Harry Callaghan, but Wambaugh's uniformed officers are generally unheroic. Some struggle to overcome cowardice, some are honest, generous and dedicated, while others display racism and homophobia and are only too willing to use excessive force. Although most patrol officers are portrayed sympathetically, 'the brass', the command structure from Lieutenant through to Deputy Chief, is invariably portrayed as incompetent and self-serving, and references to the justice system are generally disparaging. The para-military ethos of the L.A.P.D. is also made apparent, through the military background of most of the officers, through various ceremonials and especially through a brief representation of the Police Academy. However, a more subtle indication of a military mind-set is discernible in official attitudes towards officers who demonstrate symptoms of stress or mental trauma. Such behaviours meet with denigration, rather than with recognition of the need to provide counselling and treatment. This insensitivity to psychological problems is first made apparent in *The Choirboys*, which features an officer whose Vietnam-induced traumas lead to his eventual breakdown, but is exposed in much greater depth in *The Onion Field*, a documentary account of the 1963 murder of an L.A.P.D. detective.³² In Harold Becker's film version, *The Onion Field* provided a graphic illustration of the psychological disintegration of a police officer in the aftermath of trauma and thus gave its cinema audience significant

³² Joseph Wambaugh, *The Choirboys* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1975) and idem, *The Onion Field* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1973).

insights into the risks which police officers faced from P.T.S.D., while also exposing the Kafka-esque nature of the California justice system.

2. *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971)

I wanted a victorious film, a film where niggers could walk out standing tall instead of avoiding each other's eyes, looking once again like they'd had it.

Melvin Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*.³³

Like its eponymous hero, an African American boy who was abandoned by his parents and raised by whores in a brothel, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (henceforth *Sweetback*) began its life in unpromising surroundings. Written, produced and directed by Melvin Van Peebles, who cast himself in the leading role, its financial backing was flimsy and its budget depended upon its use of a non-union, largely black crew under the guise of shooting a pornographic movie, a subterfuge which was helped by its association with Cinemation, a distributor who specialised in 'low-grade porn flicks'. Its riskiness as a commercial proposition was reflected by the reluctance of theatre chains to support its launch and its initial screening was thus confined to just two theatres.³⁴ Nevertheless, the enthusiasm with which it was greeted by black audiences quickly resulted in distribution on a much wider scale and led to the film becoming, in Ed Guerrero's words, 'a nationwide smash hit that had grossed \$10 million.'³⁵ *Sweetback* became the most commercially successful independent film of its time and, according to Novotny Lawrence, could continue to claim that title until its box-office success was surpassed by *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). Although some film-scholars, Lawrence included, have argued that Ossie Davis' *Cotton Comes To Harlem* (1970) should be acknowledged as the creative inspiration for the blaxploitation movies of the Seventies, there is general agreement that the financial

³³ Melvin Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (New York: Lancer Books, 1971), p. 13.

³⁴ Steven Schneider, 'Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song', found at <<http://www.filmreference.com/Films-Str-Th/Sweet-Sweetback-s-Baadasssss-Song.html>> on 25 June 2010.

³⁵ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 86.

success of *Sweetback* and especially its ability to attract a young, black audience provided a major impetus to the release of a plethora of black films in the next few years.³⁶ Donald Bogle has argued that it ‘changed the direction of black movies’ through its portrayal of black dissent and anger and its foregrounding of black male sexuality, while Gladstone L. Yearwood goes further in describing the film as ‘the cornerstone of contemporary black cinema.’³⁷

Sweetback was a highly controversial film which, especially within the African American community, stimulated public debate on a number of issues. Its scenes of violence and of explicit sex ensured that it was given an X Certificate by the rating board of the M.P.A.A., leading Van Peebles to accuse them of ‘cultural genocide’, through the imposition of ‘white judgements on black-oriented subject matter’.³⁸ Despite securing the support of the A.C.L.U., Van Peebles failed to change the M.P.A.A.’s opinion but, nevertheless, managed to extract some advantage from the rating by including in the film’s advertising material the legend: ‘RATED X BY AN ALL-WHITE-JURY’. Perhaps the most committed supporter of the film’s politics was Black Panther co-founder Huey Newton, who devoted an entire issue of the organisation’s magazine to his own lengthy and fulsome analysis which hailed *Sweetback* as ‘the first truly revolutionary Black film’ showing ‘the need of the black community for greater unity.’ Newton praised Van Peebles for ‘advocating a bloody overthrow’ based upon the survival instincts of the victimised and

³⁶ Novotny Lawrence, *Blaxploitation Films of the 1970s: Blackness and Genre* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 27,102, n. 6.

³⁷ Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1989), p. 238; Gladstone L. Yearwood, ‘Introduction: Issues in Independent Black Filmmaking’ in Gladstone L. Yearwood (ed.), *Black Cinema Aesthetics: Issues in Independent Black Filmmaking* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Papers on Afro-American, African and Caribbean Studies, 1982), p. 12.

³⁸ ‘Sez Pic Code A White Plot, And He “Might Sue” MPAA’, *Variety*, vol. 262, no. 6, 24 March 1971, p. 5.

argued that, through his adventures, Sweetback reached ‘a high level of consciousness’ based upon the realisation that ‘you have to restore your dignity and manhood by destroying the one who took it from you’. He urged his readers to see the film, arguing that it helped to articulate the ideas which, in his view, were necessary to build the black community.³⁹

Newton’s perspective provoked a detailed response from black scholar Lerone Bennett, published in the middle-class magazine *Ebony*, which described the film as ‘neither revolutionary nor black.’ Bennett also criticised the film for its ‘antiquated white stereotypes, subtly and invidiously identified with black reality’ and accused Van Peebles of dragging ‘us back to the pre-Watts days of isolated individual acts of resistance, conceived in confusion and executed in panic.’ Bennett was particularly critical of Sweetback’s dependence upon his sexual prowess which he famously dismissed as ‘nobody ever f***ed his way to freedom.’⁴⁰ The gulf between Bennet and Newton was made most apparent by their respective verdicts on the early scene in which Sweetback, as a young boy (Mario Van Peebles), is bedded by a whore and metamorphoses into a grown man (Melvin Van Peebles). Newton argued that the woman’s love-making should be seen as a symbolic baptism of the young Sweetback ‘into his true manhood’, while Bennet describes the action as the rape of a young boy by a forty-year old prostitute.⁴¹ As Ed Guerrero has pointed out, although both Charles Peavy and Donald Bogle partially excused Sweetback’s hypersexuality by reference to traditional black folklore and to the long history of

³⁹ Huey P. Newton, ‘He Won’t Bleed Me: A Revolutionary Analysis of *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*’, *The Black Panther*, vol. VI, no. 21, 19 June 1971, pp. D, L.

⁴⁰ Lerone Bennett Jr., ‘The Emancipation Orgasm: Sweetback In Wonderland’, *Ebony*, vol. XXVI, no. 11, September 1971, p. 112. The use of asterisks reflects *Ebony*’s editorial policy at the time of publication.

⁴¹ Newton, ‘He Won’t Bleed Me’, p. C; Bennett, ‘The Emancipation Orgasm’, p. 118.

emasculatation of black men by Hollywood, other black academics and critics ‘generally agreed with Bennett’s assessment of the film.’⁴² One commentator who was firmly in this latter camp was Don L. Lee who, writing in *Black World*, condemned the film as ‘nothing but commercialism and exploitation’ and as ‘a limited, money-making, autobiographical fantasy’.⁴³

Where *Sweetback* was undoubtedly revolutionary was in its representations of Los Angeles police officers as agents of white oppression of the black community. In the Fifties and Sixties, Hollywood had provided cinema audiences with contemporary representations of racist police officers, but the conventional setting for such filmic policing was the Deep South, a location used in two notable films starring Sidney Poitier, *The Defiant Ones* (1958) and *In The Heat Of The Night* (1967). Although, before the end of 1971, both *The French Connection* and *Dirty Harry* would feature high-profile filmic detectives who used racially insensitive language, before *Sweetback*’s release no Hollywood production had included such overt representations of racism and brutality by police officers in an American city outside the South. That the first film to do so was set in Los Angeles made the contrast with past productions even more striking since, for many years, a combination of the conservatism of Hollywood and the L.A.P.D.’s deployment of substantial public relations resources had ensured that, when portrayed in the cinema or on television, L.A.P.D. officers, with very few exceptions, operated within the law and were successful in bringing criminals to justice.⁴⁴

⁴² Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 90.

⁴³ Don L. Lee, ‘The Bittersweet of Sweetback/Or Shake Yo Money Maker’, *Black World*, November 1971, p. 48.

⁴⁴ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 131.

Van Peebles dedicated his film ‘to all those brothers and sisters who have had enough of the Man’ and Tommy L. Lott has argued that a major part of *Sweetback*’s success is attributable to the way in which it captured ‘an image of self-defense that gave on-screen legitimation against racist police brutality.’⁴⁵ Thus, *Sweetback* engaged with a subject which had been a continual theme in local discourses of law enforcement: the always sensitive and sometimes explosive relationship between a predominantly white L.A.P.D., with a reputation for an aggressive approach to policing, and the African American community of Los Angeles. Operating on a shoe-string, an independent, African American film-maker provided cinema audiences with representations of a shocking catalogue of misbehaviour on the part of the L.A.P.D., including, almost certainly exaggerated, examples of the racism and brutality which had long been alleged in local print media and which, in the aftermath of Watts, had been given official acknowledgement through the report of the McCone Commission. Van Peebles also provided his audience with his own perspective on several other controversial issues involving the police: corruption, actions to prevent inter-racial mixing, persecution of black activists, and the challenges faced by black officers within a force portrayed as openly and institutionally racist.

Throughout the film, whenever police officers appear, they are depicted as agents of oppression, often employing the illegal use of force but, occasionally, using more subtle means. In an early scene, two white detectives are standing back-stage in an African American establishment which appears to be both a nightclub and a brothel, watching Sweetback perform as a stud in a live sex-show. Apparently unconcerned about this illicit

⁴⁵ Tommy L. Lott, ‘A No-Theory Theory of Contemporary Black Cinema’, in Valerie Smith (ed.), *Representing Blackness: Issues on Film and Video* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), p. 86.

entertainment and obviously on familiar terms with the proprietor, Beatle (Simon Chuckster), the officers explain that they are under pressure from their chief to do something about a recent, unsolved murder in the neighbourhood. They tell Beatle that they need to ‘borrow one of your boys’ in order ‘to look good’ and ask him to find a co-operative black man who is willing to be arrested as a suspect, promising that anyone who volunteers will be well-treated and only inconvenienced for a couple days. Although Beatle is at first reluctant to co-operate, the detectives remind him of the ‘nice relationship’ which they have with him and their wish ‘to keep it that way’, an argument which persuades him to offer them Sweetback.

Apart from making it clear that the white detectives have little interest in a thorough investigation of black-on-black crime, even involving murder, the brief dialogue also hints strongly at police corruption, with the reference to a ‘nice relationship’ implying that they will continue to tolerate Beatle’s illegal activities if they receive a share of the proceeds.⁴⁶ This initial allusion to corruption is echoed in a later scene when the African American owner of a gambling club complains about the payoffs which he needs to make, both to the ‘guineas’, understood to be Italian American organised-crime associates, and to the police. Just like Beatle’s sex-club, the gaming house is involved in illegal activity and would thus be potentially vulnerable to pressure from corrupt cops. However, despite its plausibility within the drama, and the ever-present risk of individual misbehaviour in a force of approximately five thousand officers, the type of police corruption implied in these scenes was not a major contemporary concern. Parker’s term of office was renowned for its successful attack on a long-standing L.A.P.D. culture in which officers of all ranks had been accustomed to exploit their authority for personal financial gain. For Parker, who had

⁴⁶ Van Peebles, *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, p. 23.

served for several years as the head of Internal Affairs, this was something of a moral crusade and his success left the L.A.P.D. with a reputation for incorruptibility. As a result, while other major American cities, especially New York, were repeatedly beset by corruption scandals, the issue was conspicuous by its absence from local discourses of law enforcement until the Rampart scandal of 1998. Neither the local press nor the McCone Commission featured any discussion of the topic, suggesting that the implications that the filmic detectives were ‘on the take’ may have been triggered by Van Peebles’ dramatic requirement to position the L.A.P.D. as irredeemably evil oppressors of the black community, rather than by any evidence of systematic corruption.

However, the scenes in Beatle’s club also highlight the strong presence which the L.A.P.D. had traditionally maintained in the black entertainment districts of the city, and illustrate an aspect of police activity which had become highly controversial. Although, in 1948, the Supreme Court of California had ruled that anti-miscegenation laws were unconstitutional, throughout Chief Parker’s term of office, the L.A.P.D. had discouraged ‘race mixing’.⁴⁷ The flashpoint for this contentious issue had frequently been found in the presence of white customers, including Hollywood actresses such as Rita Hayworth, Ava Gardner and Lana Turner, in the nightclubs and dance-halls around Central Avenue, the entertainment hub of South Central Los Angeles.⁴⁸ In an essay examining the decline of the area’s entertainment industry in the 1950s, Mina Yang has identified the L.A.P.D.’s concern to prevent racial mixing as one of the primary motives behind a police crackdown. In support of her argument, Yang cites an interview with jazz-trumpeter Art Farmer: ‘The police, as far as they were concerned, the only thing they saw anytime they saw any inter-

⁴⁷ *Perez v. Sharp*, 32 Cal.2d 711(1948).

⁴⁸ Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 64.

racial thing going on was crime it was a crime leading to prostitution and narcotics.’

Another contemporary jazz musician, Clora Bryant, recalls that the police ‘would stop the [white] women and pat them down and call them nigger lovers and all that kind of stuff.’⁴⁹

Although Sweetback’s performance is being enjoyed by an audience which includes white and black members of both sexes, Van Peebles uses the scene to make it clear that miscegenation is a step too far for the watching police officers. After Sweetback’s initial encounter with a black prostitute, the Master of Ceremonies asks if any female customer would like to participate as the stud’s next partner. When a white woman responds eagerly to this opportunity and begins to remove her clothes, the presence of the detectives causes Beatle to shake his head, prompting a rapid announcement that the invitation is extended ‘only to sisters’. Although the police seem to be relaxed about turning a blind-eye to live sex shows, Beatle understands that an open display of inter-racial sex would be outside their comfort zone.

If these first scenes involving the L.A.P.D. thus establish the police as a sinister and controlling presence, the sequence of events which follows directs the audience’s attention to more overt forms of police oppression of the black community: brutality towards African Americans in general and the more specific issue of police activity against militant black organisations. At Beatle’s request, Sweetback agrees to pose as the token murder suspect but, as the officers drive him to the station, they are diverted to the scene of a ‘community disturbance’ which leads to the arrest of Moo-Moo (Hubert Scales) a young black activist, accused of ‘stirring up the natives’. The detectives then drive to a deserted spot and, although Sweetback is still in their custody, they pay no attention to him and begin to beat

⁴⁹ Yang, ‘A Thin Blue Line Down Central Avenue’, p. 227, citing interviews with Art Farmer and Clora Bryant in Central Avenue Sounds Oral History Transcript, 1991, Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles.

Moo-Moo, taking care not to mark his face. Sweetback at first behaves as the detectives expect and ignores the assault until eventually he snaps, either because he finds the brutality to be beyond his endurance or through the humiliation of being treated as a pawn of the police officers. He uses a pair of handcuffs, an improvised weapon which serves both as a physical metaphor of police oppression and a powerful reminder of the manacles of slavery, to 'down' both police officers, leaving them unconscious while he and Moo-Moo escape. However, even though Sweetback has stepped out of character and put his own life at risk to save Moo-Moo, at this point he sees no reason to align himself with the young activist and the pair separate to follow their individual paths.

After a police search, which follows this incident and involves a raid on Beatle's establishment, yields no immediate results, Sweetback is eventually arrested after a random encounter with two patrolmen, who immediately call the Commissioner of Police to report their success. The Commissioner, who happens to be surrounded by reporters when he takes the call, instructs the officers to bring Sweetback in and, for the benefit of his audience, announces that, although he is pleased to hear that a witness can help the police to find Moo-Moo, he is sad to hear that the witness has been injured in a fall. After some hesitation, the young patrolman finally realises what the Commissioner means and, after hanging up the telephone, explains to his partner that they should: 'beat the information out of that nigger before we get him to the station'. Although the officers begin to follow the Commissioner's instructions by pummeling Sweetback, the black community comes to his rescue with an act of violence directed against the police. A group of children, while offering to wash the patrol-car, have surreptitiously soaked it in gasoline, and the application of a match turns the vehicle into an inferno. The scene is then transformed into a vivid representation of the Watts riot with the camera rapidly inter-cutting between the

flaming wreck of the police car, a growing crowd of people milling around and an increasing number of emergency vehicles in attendance with sirens blaring.

Amid the chaos, Sweetback is somehow able to walk away unnoticed but, in his subsequent efforts to flee Los Angeles, his mobility is severely restricted by a heavy police presence which denies him access to conventional points of departure: the bus terminal, the railway station and the airport. Instead he is forced to rely upon the black community and, after a chance reunion with Moo-Moo, the two fugitives are eventually driven to the outskirts of the city by the owner of an illicit gambling club. Abandoned in the unfamiliar space of the countryside, they survive an encounter with a group of Hell's Angels through a further display of Sweetback's sexual prowess, in which, somewhat improbably, he is allowed to use sex as his means of combat with the white gang's female leader. Shortly afterwards, when he and Moo-Moo face arrest at gunpoint by two Sheriff's deputies, Sweetback fights back and kills both officers with improvised weapons, in this case another pair of handcuffs and a pool-cue which serves as a spear. Offered a chance to be carried to safety by an African American motorcyclist, who has been sent by the Hell's Angels leader to save him, Sweetback declines the opportunity and insists that the wounded Moo-Moo should be given first chance to escape: 'Take Him. He's our future, Brer.' After this sacrifice, Sweetback makes his own escape by travelling on foot through the back-streets of Los Angeles and then using a combination of walking, running and riding on the back of trucks to reach the Mexican border.

Within this brief sequence, Van Peebles' direction provides three explicit representations of the L.A.P.D.'s willingness to use excessive force against African Americans in circumstances where the violence is clearly pre-meditated and illegal. The beating of Moo-Moo, which marks the first step in Sweetback's transition from super-stud

to activist, is punishment meted out by the fists of two detectives and, presumably, designed to teach the young militant a lesson. The Commissioner's barely coded instructions to the patrolman, which result in the beating given to Sweetback, indicate an L.A.P.D. culture in which violence against African Americans is seen as normal behavior to the extent that it is openly advocated by senior officers and accepted, as a matter of course, by uniformed street-cops. By making the patrolmen young, handsome and, in all other respects, well-mannered, Van Peebles is clearly signaling to his audience that violence is an all-pervasive influence within the culture of the L.A.P.D. The final depiction of violence on the part of L.A.P.D. officers comes during Beatle's interrogation. Refusing to accept that the club-owner does not know where Sweetback is hiding, the frustrated detectives fire gunshots immediately adjacent to both of his ears, leaving him deafened and bleeding.

In some aspects of these representations, there is little doubt that Van Peebles' version of police brutality is exaggerated and at least one contemporary white critic accused him of 'caricatures of white ... lawmen' which 'would be beneath Black Panther contempt, so stale and crude are they.'⁵⁰ Although successive L.A.P.D. Chiefs clearly did not do enough to reduce the excessive use of force by officers, historians of the L.A.P.D. and contemporary commentators alike have generally attributed this particular shortcoming to failures of leadership and have avoided any suggestion that a Chief would deliberately instruct officers to act illegally. Moreover, for purposes of effective interrogation, deliberately to induce a state of deafness in a potential informant seems to be self-defeating. However, despite the extreme nature of some of these dramatic interpretations of police

⁵⁰ *New York Magazine*, 3 May 1971, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, Clippings File, Margaret Herrick Library, no title or page reference provided.

brutality, their significance lay in the fact that, at last, a feature film had illustrated the most common real-life complaints of the African American community against the L.A.P.D.

Throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, black-owned newspapers such as the *California Eagle* and the *Los Angeles Sentinel* had regularly publicised individual incidents in which it was alleged that white police officers had mistreated black suspects. However, in the mainstream, white-owned local newspapers and broadcast media, the years before Watts had seen relatively few reports on police brutality. In the aftermath of the rioting and especially after the report of the McCone Commission was published, allegations of police brutality persisted at a high level and were given extensive coverage in all local media outlets. In August 1966, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that complaints against the police had risen by seventeen percent in the previous six months, a continuation of a pattern which had begun in 1965, when complaints for the full year had grown by thirty-three percent. An L.A.P.D. spokesman agreed that ‘complaints of police brutality have increased materially’ but also attempted to deflect criticism by suggesting that it was now ‘common for groups engaged in civil rights activities to shout police brutality.’⁵¹ The intransigent nature of this problem was further demonstrated in 1969 when Booker Griffin, writing in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, accused the L.A.P.D. of ‘over-running our community with bands of thugs in blue, protected by badges and guns and hostile to our men, women and children.’⁵²

Apart from its ground-breaking representations of white police officers engaged in cold-blooded assaults on African American suspects and witnesses, *Sweetback* also engaged with two issues which were closely associated with police brutality: the L.A.P.D.’s

⁵¹ Irv Burleigh, ‘Complaints Against Police on Increase’, *Los Angeles Times*, 11 August 1966, p. SF1.

⁵² Booker Griffin, ‘Law’s Lawlessness Frightens’, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 18 December 1969, p. A7.

specific targeting of black activists and the legitimacy of both individual and group violence as a response to abuses of authority. Although, two decades earlier, Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *No Way Out* (1950) had celebrated a black community's use of pre-emptive violence against a group of white thugs, *Sweetback*'s evident support of direct action against the police by African Americans was a shock for cinema audiences and partially explains the huge popularity which the film enjoyed among young, inner-city blacks.⁵³ White film critic Jim Hoberman has observed that: 'if Sidney Poitier was an analogue to Martin Luther King, *Sweetback* embodied Black Power, the Black Muslims, the Black Panthers.'⁵⁴ A contemporary review by the film critic of the *Los Angeles Times*, a newspaper with a predominantly white readership, simply noted that '*Sweetback* emerges as a symbol of defiance of mythical proportions.'⁵⁵

Throughout the Sixties, while allegations of excessive use of force against members of minority communities were reported on a routine basis, both the L.A.P.D. and the F.B.I. had also been accused of harassing black extremist groups, with a mixture of surveillance, infiltration and excessive violence. The L.A.P.D. raid on a Nation of Islam Mosque in 1962, which led to widespread condemnation from African Americans, can be seen as a harbinger of a problem which would become more acute in the aftermath of Watts and of civil disturbances in other major American cities. In the years immediately preceding the release of *Sweetback*, violent black activism had become an issue of public concern, largely fuelled by the activities of the Black Panthers, a militant black organisation founded in Oakland in 1966. By July 1969, F.B.I. Director J. Edgar Hoover was describing the

⁵³ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, p. 235.

⁵⁴ Jim Hoberman, *The Dream Life: Movies, Media and the Mythology of the Sixties* (New York and London: The New Press, 2003), p. 301.

⁵⁵ Kevin Thomas, 'Ghetto Life Focus of "Sweet"', *Los Angeles Times*, 15 May 1971, p. A6.

Panthers as the ‘greatest threat to the internal security of the country’ and, in the early Seventies, the prosecutions of several high-profile figures generated huge amounts of media coverage.⁵⁶ Angela Davis, a lecturer at the University of California, Los Angeles (U.C.L.A.) and a member of both the Black Panther Party and the Communist Party of America, was accused of purchasing the guns used in an attempted jail-break by George Jackson, the surviving ‘Soledad Brother’, and was arrested in 1970 before being acquitted in 1972. Bobby Seale, a co-founder of the Black Panthers, who had been jailed in 1968 following violence at the Democratic Convention, was a defendant again in 1970 at the New Haven Black Panther trials in which several Panthers were accused of killing an F.B.I. informant. In Seale’s case the jury was unable to reach a verdict but, also in 1975, Geronimo Pratt, who had served for a time as the Panthers’ ‘Minister of Defence’, was arrested and charged with the murder of a woman during the course of a robbery in Santa Monica two years earlier, a charge for which he was eventually convicted in 1972. Pratt would serve twenty-seven years for the crime before his sentence was overturned, following the revelation that a key prosecution witness had been working undercover for the F.B.I.

From their roots in Oakland, the Panthers had quickly attempted to establish a Chapter in Los Angeles and, as an organisation whose founding principles included the aim of ‘an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and the MURDER of black people’, predictably came into conflict with the L.A.P.D. both on the streets and in the courts.⁵⁷ Joe Domanick has described the way that Chief Tom Reddin authorised ‘provocative

⁵⁶ ‘Panthers Called Internal Threat: Panthers Attacked by F.B.I.’, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 17 July 1969, pp. A1-2.

⁵⁷ *To Determine the Destiny of Our Black Community: The Black Panther Party’s 10-Point Platform and Program*, found at <<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6445/>> on 23 May 2010.

surveillance of almost every move made by almost every Black Panther in the city.’⁵⁸ In February 1969, local Panther leaders Jon Huggins and Alprentice Carter, both former gang members, were murdered on the U.C.L.A. campus by members of a rival black-nationalist group, a crime which, according to Mike Davis, surviving Panthers still believe to have been instigated by the L.A.P.D.⁵⁹

Local newspapers found difficulty in determining the extent of support for the Panthers within the black community. In December 1969, following the dramatic shoot-out between S.W.A.T. and the Panthers, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* reported a divergence of opinion along generational lines, with young blacks being openly hostile to the police attack and older residents indicating ‘astonishment’ at the scale of the conflict and questioning its purpose.⁶⁰ The *Los Angeles Times* reported a surprising demonstration of support for the militants, with many African Americans relating their own experiences of mistreatment by the police to the extreme violence of the siege: ‘It came as a shock to many last week when thousands rallied to the defense of the Black Panthers, heretofore a symbol of lawlessness to most blacks and whites alike ... At least one of the reasons is not hard to find. It is called police brutality. Real or imagined, it is still a fact of life in the black community, four years after Watts.’⁶¹ However, an article in the same newspaper six months later suggested that other civil rights organisations which had taken part in the demonstration had been duped by the Panthers, that the real level of support amongst African Americans was relatively low and, in line with the report in the *Los Angeles*

⁵⁸ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 206.

⁵⁹ Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 298.

⁶⁰ Charles Baireuther, ‘Panther-Police Shootout Brings Mixed Reactions’, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, p. 11 December 1969, p. A3.

⁶¹ Ray Rogers, ‘“Police Brutality” a Fact of Black Life’, *Los Angeles Times*, 21 December 1969, p. 11.

Sentinel, that teenagers were the most receptive group.⁶² Nevertheless, in the following year, Carl C. McCraven, a board member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.), suggested that actions against the Panthers, in Los Angeles and in other American cities, were motivated by racial prejudice rather than by crime prevention and claimed that police raids had ‘forged a new unity among Negroes’.⁶³ Mike Davis has argued that, by the early Seventies, ‘the combined efforts of the FBI’s notorious COINTELPRO program and the LAPD’s Public Disorder Intelligence Division ... were concentrated upon destroying Los Angeles’ Black Power vanguards.’⁶⁴ In April 1970, the Panthers unsuccessfully sued the L.A.P.D. for ten million dollars, accusing the police of ‘unconstitutionally harassing members of the party and depriving them of their civil liberties.’⁶⁵

Although Moo-Moo’s character is barely developed and his particular brand of activism is left unexplained, a black audience would, almost certainly, associate him with the Panthers. The detectives themselves, at the time of his arrest, remark that Moo-Moo ‘looks like a sniper’, a reference to the Panthers’ well-publicised espousal of armed resistance. However, there is no doubt of Moo-Moo’s importance within the narrative and the risks which Sweetback is prepared to take in order to protect the young activist from the police serve to underline what Van Peebles sees as his metamorphosis from a self-centred individual to a member of the black community.

⁶² Roy Haynes, ‘Panthers vs. Police: Where They Stand Today’, *Los Angeles Times*, 21 June 1970, p. A1.

⁶³ Kenneth J. Fanucchi, ‘Raids Against Panthers Called Unifying Force for Negroes’, *Los Angeles Times*, 22 January 1970, p. SF1.

⁶⁴ Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 298.

⁶⁵ ‘Black Panthers Sue L.A. Police For \$10 Million’, *Los Angeles Times*, 7 April 1970, p. B8.

The film also provides insights into racial aspects of life inside the L.A.P.D. when the Commissioner is seen exhorting a group of plain-clothes officers to find Sweetback and concludes his speech by saying: ‘I want them. They’re cop killers and niggers to boot!’ Immediately after using the racial slur, he realises that he may have caused offence to the two black officers in the room and attempts to mollify them through condescension: ‘You have the chance to be a real credit to your people if you bring those guys in.’ Throughout this scene the two African American officers appear expressionless, implying that they are used to such examples of racial insensitivity and that they are unable or unwilling to stand up for themselves, having sold out to ‘the man’. Although, in 1971, only one L.A.P.D. officer in twenty was black, the presence of two black plain-clothes officers in a hunt for an African American fugitive would have been quite normal. In a force whose patrol cars had remained segregated until 1961, Joe Domanick has pointed out that for many years it had been customary for plain-clothes work to be a promotional route for high-calibre African American officers, partly reflecting their obvious usefulness in investigating crimes within the black community and partly to avoid the potential embarrassment of white patrolmen having a black supervisor with stripes on his sleeve.⁶⁶ The depiction of the African American officers in *Sweetback* would certainly not have helped the L.A.P.D. in its attempts to recruit minorities, an issue which, in 1970, had been highlighted in an article in the *Los Angeles Times*. Sergeant John Walton, himself an African American, had suggested that recruitment of black officers remained difficult since ‘police relations with the black community have not always been as good as they should be’, while a white officer who preferred to remain anonymous suggested that the recruitment problem was directly linked

⁶⁶ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 138.

to regular charges of police brutality.⁶⁷ Shortly after the release of *Sweetback*, a columnist in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* gave a rather different perspective when he claimed that black men were reluctant to join the L.A.P.D. because ‘they believe that the department is racist and the blacks that are there are nothing but house Negroes.’⁶⁸ One year later, African American reporter Roy Wilkins made an identical point in the *Los Angeles Times*, suggesting that many blacks were reluctant to join the police, considering it a ‘betrayal’ of their race to do so.⁶⁹

Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song provides an avowedly black perspective on the relationships between the African American community of Los Angeles and the L.A.P.D. through a vivid representation of the force as vicious agents of white oppression or, in the words of Jim Hoberman, as ‘an official lynch mob.’⁷⁰ Although the scenes of police villainy were exaggerated, the actions of the cinematic officers were nevertheless consistent with the troubled history of the L.A.P.D.’s relationship with the African American population. In South Central and in Watts, reflecting what Mike Davies has famously described as the ‘spatial apartheid’ of Los Angeles, the predominantly black population had frequently characterised the police as an army of occupation and, for many years, the propensity of the L.A.P.D. to use excessive force when dealing with black suspects had been well documented, both in the local press and in the report of the McCone Commission.⁷¹ In the circumstances, it was hardly surprising that the scenes in which *Sweetback* strikes back by wounding or killing police officers were wildly popular with its mostly young, black

⁶⁷ John Kumbula, ‘Police Launch Drive to End Lag In Recruitment’, *Los Angeles Times*, 23 March 1970, p. A1.

⁶⁸ ‘Young Blacks and LAPD’, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 16 September 1971, p. A.6

⁶⁹ Roy Wilkins, ‘More Blacks Should Apply for Law Enforcement Jobs’, *Los Angeles Times*, 10 July 1972, p. C7.

⁷⁰ Hoberman, *The Dream Life*, p. 301.

⁷¹ Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 230.

audience.⁷² Just as, in real life, the L.A.P.D. played a pivotal role in the relationships between the dominant white population and the minority communities of Los Angeles so, in the film, their brutality provides the crucial stimulus for the development of Sweetback's political consciousness. Their attempts to arrest him allow him to demonstrate Van Peebles' basic tenet that 'if you can get it together and stand up to the man, you can win.'⁷³

⁷² 'Sweet Song of Success', *Newsweek*, 21 June 1971, p. 53.

⁷³ Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, p. 197.

3. *Bush Mama* (1976)

... the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to.

H.R. Haldeman, quoting President Richard Nixon's alleged perspective on Welfare.⁷⁴

In a striking example of life pre-empting art, the opening scene of Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama*, which shows a group of black men being harassed by the L.A.P.D., is a recording of an actual encounter between members of his African American film crew and some white police officers, for whom the combination of black men and expensive filming equipment apparently amounted to probable cause that a crime was in progress.⁷⁵ As Amy Ongiri has observed, this brief sequence 'documents in reality the degradation and humiliation that [the remainder of the film] represents fictionally.'⁷⁶ Ironically, by racially profiling a group of black men, who are themselves preparing to produce representations of the L.A.P.D. as persecutors of the black community, the actions of the white officers provide documentary footage which proves the very point which the film-maker intended to represent. These images of real life set the tone for Gerima's fictional version of the L.A.P.D.'s presence in the black community: always oppressive, often deadly and ultimately evil.

Bush Mama's representations of police officers are made even more chilling by the social context in which they are seen to operate. The film's more famous predecessor, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* had also portrayed acts of extreme brutality by the L.A.P.D. against African Americans but those scenes were contained within a narrative

⁷⁴ H.R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1994), p. 53

⁷⁵ Clyde Taylor, 'Decolonizing The Image: New U.S. Black Cinema', in P. Steven (ed.), *Jump Cut: Hollywood, Politics and Counter-Cinema* (Toronto: Between The Lines, 1985), p. 168.

⁷⁶ Amy Ongiri, 'Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama*', *Black Filmmaker*, vol. 6, no. 24, May 2004, p. 50.

which was constructed around the increasingly violent interactions between a fugitive and a variety of officers who were trying to arrest him, first for assault and then for the murder of two Sheriff's Deputies. With a stud from a live sex show as its main protagonist, and with a cinematic version of a black community which largely consisted of men and women employed in illicit or disreputable businesses, together with the occasional armed activist, it was unsurprising that Van Peebles' film identified the L.A.P.D. as the sole agency of that community's oppression. Gerima's cinematic version of Watts provides a more realistic impression of black life in the Seventies and includes hard-working women who are not prostitutes, military veterans struggling with their nightmares, successful entrepreneurs and welfare-dependents as well as a number of citizens whose behaviour is either disturbed or simply criminal. He also takes care to represent the police as just one facet of what Mike Murashige has described as 'a coercive state control apparatus' which includes courts, prisons and welfare officials, all of whom combine to control the poor. The impact of these agencies is omnipresent through the audio background, a powerful combination of police sirens, the incessant noise of a police helicopter, the crackle of police radios and a woman's voice coldly reciting a list of standard questions for a potential welfare recipient, creating a 'dissonant and seemingly inescapable chorus of the state's presence in these characters' lives.⁷⁷

Gerima's heroine is Dorothy (Barbara O. Jones), a single mother forced to cope with a variety of challenges. Having previously lost her husband in the Vietnam conflict, her new partner, another Vietnam veteran known as T. C. (Johnny Weathers), has been jailed for an unexplained crime which he almost certainly did not commit. Unable to find a

⁷⁷ Mike Murashige, 'Haile Gerima and the Political Economy of Cinematic Resistance', in Valerie Smith (ed.), *Representing Blackness*, pp. 188-90.

job, Dorothy has become a 'welfare sister', financially dependent upon payments from the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (A.F.D.C.) scheme. She is pregnant with T. C.'s child and shares a small apartment in Watts with Luann (Susan Williams), her young, pre-teen daughter. Gerima's film, in Murashige's words, depicts 'a battle for Dorothy's soul' as she faces ever-mounting pressures which threaten herself, her daughter and her unborn child.⁷⁸ While she constantly trudges the streets of Watts in search of a job, her welfare officer is threatening to cut off her benefits unless she agrees to have an abortion.⁷⁹

Dorothy is surrounded by alternative voices, each attempting to explain the plight of the black community. Although her heavy-drinking friend Molly blames 'niggers, niggers, niggers', arguing that African Americans are the architects of their own misfortunes, Amy Ongiri has pointed out that Dorothy is also receiving messages of empowerment.⁸⁰ Her bar-owning friend Simmie provides a moderate perspective by insisting that violence plays into the hands of white people and arguing that only through 'togetherness' and 'calculation' can African Americans hope to gain a 'big hunk of Uncle Sam's pie'. Her teenage neighbour Angie, an advocate of armed activism, provides Dorothy with a poster of a defiant Angolan woman, carrying a machine gun. Her partner T. C., in a series of letters from jail, portrayed by Gerima as soliloquies delivered straight to camera, attacks capitalism as the source of white oppression.

T. C.'s incarceration and his messages to Dorothy allow Gerima to use prison as the setting for several scenes, each of which, as Paula Massood suggests, he uses to ensure that

⁷⁸ Murashige, 'Haile Gerima and the Political Economy of Cinematic Resistance', p.187.

⁷⁹ A.F.D.C. is a Federal programme, which has been in place since 1935. In the 1970s, its provisions allowed a child born to an unmarried mother to be declared as ineligible for Welfare funds. *A Brief History of the AFDC Program*, found at <<http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/AFDC/baseline/1history.pdf>> on 15 July 2010.

⁸⁰ Ongiri, 'Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama*', *Black Filmmaker*, p. 50.

his audience can put ‘faces to the victims of the police state.’⁸¹ The message of oppression is underlined by the contrast between the white warden and the men behind bars, each of whom is black, a dramatic interpretation of prison-life in California which is an exaggerated version of a harsh contemporary reality. In 1975, blacks comprised eight percent of the state’s population but approximately thirty-three percent of its prison population, an incarceration rate much higher than that of whites or of Latinos.⁸²

In a film which portrays the entire apparatus of the state as the oppressor of the black community, it is no surprise that L.A.P.D. officers occupy a relatively small amount of screen time. Nevertheless, their presence is inescapable, through the ever-present background noise and through the shocking nature of their on-screen behaviour. After the accidental clash with Gerima’s film crew, which provides the opening scene, L.A.P.D. patrolmen are represented in four further violent incidents. On the street outside Dorothy’s home, a man who is already wearing handcuffs continues to act aggressively, prompting an officer to shoot him in the back. Outside the welfare office, an apparently disturbed man who is brandishing a large axe is unceremoniously shot, and presumably killed, by a patrolman. The film concludes with two inter-connected scenes of appalling brutality. A uniformed officer, who finds Luann alone on the street while her mother is looking for work, claims to be suspicious of her motives and insists that she prove that she is a resident by taking him to her home. There, after handcuffing her to the bed, he rapes her.

⁸¹ Massood, *Black City Cinema*, p. 112.

⁸² Joan Petersilia, ‘Understanding California Corrections’, California Policy Research Center, University of California, Berkeley May 2006, p. 51; U.S. Census Bureau found at <<http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056/tab19.pdf>> on 16 July 2010.

While the rape is in progress, Dorothy returns home and, after a struggle, kills the officer by repeatedly stabbing him with an umbrella. Dorothy is then arrested and, while in custody, is beaten by the police to the point where she loses her baby through a miscarriage.

Each of these scenes supports the perception of L.A.P.D. officers as brutal racists and the scene in which Luann is handcuffed and raped is an extreme example of sadistic exploitation which carries distinct echoes of the sexual abuse of black women by white slave-owners. Nevertheless, in Murashige's opinion, the film's most significant symbol of white dominance over the black community is delivered by a still photograph. One of several posters which are brought into Dorothy's home by Angie, and described by her as 'the brother that the pigs shot', it shows a black, male body, lying naked on a slab in the morgue and riddled with bullet holes. Gerima uses the poster, which carries the legend 'Murdered by the L.A.P.D.', on multiple occasions to underline the involvement of the state in the various forms of oppression which the black community has to endure. It is juxtaposed with shots of a drunken black man, who has endured most of the possible forms of white oppression, to undermine his belligerent and risible claim that white people 'ain't never messed with me'. It is inter-cut with shots of the distended belly of a naked woman who is lying on an abortionist's operating table, linking murder by officialdom on the streets with officially-inspired death in the womb. Finally, it is displayed alongside a photograph of Dorothy's dead husband in his military uniform, implying a link between the deaths of thousands of black soldiers in Vietnam and the deaths of black men at the hands of the justice system in general and of the L.A.P.D. in particular.⁸³ Gerima reinforces this last point through another of T.C.'s messages from jail in which he argues that lynching

⁸³ Murashige, 'Haile Gerima and the Political Economy of Cinematic Resistance', p. 199.

‘was replaced by the electric chair and the electric chair by the gas chamber and the gas chamber by the firing squad on the boulevards of America.’

Unlike *Sweetback*, which had taken millions at the box-office and had generated a large amount of public debate, *Bush Mama*, which was produced during Gerima’s final year as a graduate student at U.C.L.A. film school, was shown exclusively on ‘the festival and academic circuit’.⁸⁴ Although, for the first months of its life, the film generally passed under the radar of most film critics, its subsequent showings in film festivals or in special programmes attracted some interest. In January 1977, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* reported on a screening at The Onajes Cultural Teahouse and, while making no mention of the film’s violent images, praised *Bush Mama* for ‘capturing the rich, jive style of ghetto language’ in ‘a powerful portrait of urban black America seen through the eyes of a strong, proud black woman.’⁸⁵ One year later, a screening in a West Los Angeles cinema produced a review in the *Los Angeles Times*, which revealed little about the film but managed, unintentionally, to capture the extent to which both the physical terrain of the inner city and the aspirations and struggles of individual African Americans were completely unrecognisable to some white residents of Los Angeles. Linda Gross acknowledged *Bush Mama* as a ‘raw and revolutionary film’ but suggested that it ‘failed to capture the apolitical anomie that characterizes Los Angeles—especially in economically depressed areas.’ Gross appeared to be predictably unfamiliar with the streets of Watts, since she also complained that the film’s ‘sense of locale’ was unconvincing and that, apart from ‘RTD buses and lapels on policemen’s uniforms, little specifically denotes Los Angeles.’ Her final concern was that the conclusion of the film was so ‘ugly and threatening that it prevents the viewer from

⁸⁴ Massood, *Black City Cinema*, p. 107.

⁸⁵ ‘Teahouse Premier Film Showing’, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 22 January 1977, p. B2A.

coming to terms with the film's harsh message.⁸⁶ Writing in the *New York Times*, on the occasion of an Independent Black Film Festival in 1979, Janet Maslin provided a more considered response and suggested that the most significant message of the film could be found in 'the sense of these characters' imprisonment and frustration'. In Maslin's opinion, this message was made more understandable to the audience by Gerima's inclusion of relatively minor irritations, specifically citing T.C.'s lament that: 'We claim that we "right on" and they come back at us with "Right On" deodorant.'⁸⁷

Although *Bush Mama* differs greatly from *Sweetback* in its representations of the black community, each film portrays L.A.P.D. officers as its oppressors, rather than its protectors or servants. However, one scene in particular intersects with a strand of contemporary discourse in a way which demonstrates that, in the real world, African American attitudes towards the L.A.P.D. were rather more complex. At the beginning of the film, on a crowded street, an unaided Dorothy struggles in a vain attempt to prevent a young black child from stealing her purse. Her failure to resist her attacker, who is only half her size, leaves her in a state of despair, alone and penniless on the street. Paula Massood has echoed Gerima's own thoughts in noting that the scene provides the first indication of Dorothy's lack of agency and should be seen in stark contrast with the way that the later violence inflicted upon Luann proves to be transformative and empowering.⁸⁸ However, this brief portrayal of black-on-black crime also serves to illustrate a contemporary dilemma in which the concern of the black community to reduce crime was tempered by its fear of the L.A.P.D. This divergence of views was made apparent in the months

⁸⁶ Linda Gross, 'Bush Mama: A Trip to Awareness', *Los Angeles Times*, 7 April 1978, p. I20

⁸⁷ Janet Maslin, 'Bush Mama Tells Story of a Coast Ghetto', *New York Times*, 25 September 1979, p. C8.

⁸⁸ Massood, *Black City Cinema*, p. 111.

surrounding the completion of the film by a series of articles published in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*. In August 1975, a report on a recent N.A.A.C.P. letter-writing campaign against police brutality indicated that popular support for the initiative had been tempered by the opinions of those ‘ who disagreed with charges of police abuse and instead called for more police patrols of their areas to prevent black-on-black crime.’⁸⁹ Then, in September 1976, two further articles underlined this dilemma. Regular columnist Jim Cleaver argued that, since crime appeared to be higher in black communities, more police were required: ‘And when there is greater police activity, there is greater aggravation on the part of the citizenry.’⁹⁰ An editorial then suggested that, although there was no doubt that local people felt badly treated by the L.A.P.D., they needed to reflect on the fact that ‘nearly 100 per cent of the crimes that are committed in the community are committed by black people against black people.’⁹¹ These articles suggest that, ten years after Watts, the long-standing argument, in which the police attributed the relatively large number of blacks arrested to a higher black crime rate and blacks attributed the same phenomenon to police harassment, was unresolved and that, police brutality notwithstanding, some members of the black community believed that a significant police presence was necessary for its well-being.⁹²

Gerima himself has identified the theft of Dorothy’s bag as the first of three separate indications of what he describes as her ‘awaking consciousness and assertion.’ Although she is unable to thwart the young thief, as the story develops she becomes increasingly

⁸⁹ Faith C. Christmas, ‘Citizens Pro and Con on “Police Abuse” Protest’, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 27 August 1975, p. A10.

⁹⁰ Jim Cleaver, ‘The Problem with Black-on-Black Crime’, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 9 September 1976, p. A7.

⁹¹ ‘Black-On-Black Crime’, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 23 September 1976, p. A6.

⁹² The black community’s difficulty in reconciling fear of crime with fear of over-zealous policing would endure for many years and, in 1988, would be represented in *Colors*. For further discussion see Chapter IV, 2, *Colors*, pp. 195-97.

assertive and, after an intrusive home-visit from a Welfare Officer, she manages to stay mentally strong and defiantly imagines herself smashing a bottle over the woman's head. However, the rape of Luann is the violation which finally prompts her to take decisive action or, as Gerima describes it, is 'the last stair from which she would be pushed'.⁹³ Paula Massood has expanded upon Gerima's assessment, suggesting that, when Dorothy kills the policeman, her actions represent not only the instinctive urge of a mother to protect her daughter, but also a political transformation, made manifest in her attempt to preserve the integrity of her family. This transformation is then symbolised by the casting-away of the wig which Dorothy has worn 'day and night' throughout the film, presumably in an attempt to conform to the dominant, white perception of what a woman's hair should look like. Like Sweetback, Dorothy has found her consciousness as a result of her personal exposure to the violence of the L.A.P.D. and, although Gerima makes it clear that other agencies of the state have played their part in her persecution, once again the white policeman is the most vivid cinematic symbol of white oppression of African Americans.

⁹³ Haile Gerima, quoted in Steve Howard, 'A Cinema of Transformation: The Films of Haile Gerima', *Cineaste*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1985, p. 29.

4. *The New Centurions* (1972)

(L.A.P.D.) street cops haven't necessarily read the police novels of Joseph Wambaugh, but they've seen the movies.

Peter Boyer.⁹⁴

Released just over one year after *Sweetback*, the screen adaptation of Wambaugh's novel marked Hollywood's first exploration of the challenges faced by the L.A.P.D. in policing the minority populations of Los Angeles. When compared to Van Peebles' stark portrayal of police officers as agents of white racism, the film's engagement with this controversial issue was tentative but, in terms of previous offerings from the major studios, it was positively revolutionary. Shot from the point of view of white policemen, *The New Centurions* nevertheless managed to differentiate itself from its Hollywood predecessors through its representations of uniformed officers and their interaction with minority communities, its focus on the psychological pressures of police work as well as its physical risks, and the visible presence of African American and Latino patrolmen in its supporting cast.

Despite exposing its audience to issues and locations which had never previously been seen in a Hollywood *policier*, the film's approach was often patronising and always anodyne. Given that Hollywood was dominated by white producers and directors and given its traditionally cautious approach to racial issues, a screen adaptation of a novel written by a white police officer was always likely to result in relatively conservative representations of inner-city law enforcement. However, the potential impact of *The New Centurions* was also hampered by its producers' decision to transplant the story from the early 1960s to the early 1970s. Whereas the narrative arc of Wambaugh's novel follows the experiences of three young police officers, Roy (Stacey Keach), Sergio (Erik Estrada) and Gus (Scott

⁹⁴ Peter Boyer, 'Bad Cops', transcript of *Frontline*, broadcast on 21 May 2001 and found at <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/lapd/etc/boyer.html>> on 3 May 2009.

Wilson), from their training period at the Los Angeles Police Academy in the summer of 1960 to the chaotic drama of the 1965 Watts Riot, the screen adaptation resides uneasily in a temporal no-man's land. Its story-line and much of its dialogue are taken directly from Wambaugh's original prose but, despite the absence of any overt references to the calendar, the setting is clearly contemporary. The hairstyles of both male and female characters, including some heroic 'Afros', are strongly indicative of the late Sixties and Seventies, but more conclusive chronological evidence is provided by the inclusion within the narrative of two popular songs which were first released in the Seventies.⁹⁵

Wambaugh, who was still working as a police officer when the film was being made, is unable to provide any categorical reasons for this chronological shift but acknowledges that the change allowed the film-makers to avoid any reference to the Watts Riot, a decision which he claims was made on budgetary grounds: 'Robert Chartoff ... one of the film's producers, said to me: "We aren't about to spend the money to reproduce the burning of L.A. That would be ridiculous."' ⁹⁶ Since Melvyn Van Peebles had managed to convey a vivid impression of the Watts riot by the simple expedient of showing a police car in flames, the assertion attributed to Chartoff is not very convincing and it seems possible that the producers may have seen representations of those disturbances as a risky commercial proposition for a film whose target audience was largely white. Regardless of motive, the decision denied the film the opportunity to emulate the novel in using the turmoil of Watts to illustrate the challenges faced by a group of young officers, forced to come to terms with the limits of their own courage and of the L.A.P.D.'s ability to maintain law and order in the face of mass disobedience. Moreover, the retention of dialogue from a

⁹⁵ Carole King, 'It's Too Late Baby', *Tapestry* (Ode, 1971); Bread, 'Make It With You', *On The Waters* (Elektra 45684, 1970).

⁹⁶ Joseph Wambaugh, e-mail to Robert Bevan, 29 January 2008.

novel set in the early Sixties increased the likelihood that the film's attitudes to race and gender would be inconsistent with the expectations of audiences and commentators in the Seventies. Despite these self-inflicted handicaps, *The New Centurions* provides useful insights into the challenges of policing Los Angeles. The filmic officers, who spend much of their time in the inner city, confront a wide range of criminal activity, including prostitution, public indecency, extortion, robbery and child abuse. Through these fictional encounters, representations of the L.A.P.D. in *The New Centurions* engage with a number of issues that were prominent in contemporary discourses of law enforcement, most notably the racial composition of the L.A.P.D. and its vexed relationship with the increasingly vocal minority communities of Los Angeles.

The film opens with a demonstration of what *Time* had described in 1968 as the L.A.P.D.'s 'para-military esprit'.⁹⁷ In a brief, but powerful, sequence, the audience is given a vivid impression of the Los Angeles Police Academy, a nationally famous training facility which epitomised the L.A.P.D.'s commitment to police-professionalisation. A succession of rapidly edited shots gives the look and feel of marine-style 'boot camp' training as the recruits are drilled through a range of physical tests: hill-running, unarmed combat, and firearms practice including the use of pistols and shot-guns. The action also includes a brief glimpse of recruits being trained in the choke hold, a restraining manoeuvre designed to render a troublesome suspect temporarily unconscious which, during the Eighties, would become a particular point of controversy.⁹⁸ The sequence concludes in a graduation ceremony where, in full dress-uniform and with flags flying, the troops march

⁹⁷ 'Police: The Thin Blue Line', *Time*, vol. 92, no. 2, 19 July 1968, p. 18.

⁹⁸ For more details of the controversy surrounding the choke hold, see Chapter III, 4, *The Choirboys*, pp. 139-40.

on to the parade-ground, where they fire a volley in celebration of their status as fully-fledged members of the L.A.P.D.

This brisk opening thus reinforces the military implications of the film's title, a phrase which is derived from a conversation between Roy and Kilvinsky (George C. Scott), a veteran officer whose role as mentor to his rookie partner dominates the first half of the film. The two men are off-duty and enjoying a few drinks in a strip-club, a filmic setting which was unusual in 1972 but which would become a cliché in subsequent police movies, when the veteran officer sorrowfully claims that a softer approach to crime and punishment by society is undermining good police-work:

Kilvinsky: It's over. We're through. The public don't understand. Lawyers, judges, they don't understand. They only see the criminals. We see the victims.

Roy: They don't like us, but they need us. I think they always have. Even the Romans had centurions to keep the peace. They were unsupported, unhonoured, disliked. Just like us. But they kept the peace, for a while, until Rome was finally overrun by barbarians.

Kilvinsky: Here's to the new centurions. Let's hope they do a better job than the old ones.

This simple scene marks an important intersection of film and civic discourse. While, Roy and Kilvinsky were employing one military metaphor to capture their view of a policeman's role, on the streets of Los Angeles real police officers were operating under the aegis of an even more powerful military metaphor: 'the thin blue line'. This phrase, introduced by Chief Parker shortly after the 'Bloody Christmas' crisis of 1952, invoked an image of a police force as soldiers in the front-line of the fight to preserve society from those who refuse to accept the rule of law, a broad grouping which, just like 'the barbarians', also carried a racial connotation. Although the notion of a "thin blue line" arrayed against the forces of evil' captured the imagination of police and public alike, Edward Escobar has pointed out that the concept of the L.A.P.D. as soldiers in the war on

crime was a double-edged sword. It represented a powerful force for solidarity among Parker's troops but also served to alienate them from minority communities, a flaw which would persist for decades.⁹⁹ While the dialogue between Roy and Kilvinsky reflects a policeman's disconsolate view of the increasing constraints placed upon officers by society, the metaphoric juxtaposition of 'barbarians' and 'centurions' also serves as a reminder of the potential for conflict in the inner city, where the L.A.P.D. saw the black community as a source of criminal activity, while the black community saw the white police force as a paramilitary agency of oppression. As early as 1962, the *California Eagle*, a local black newspaper with a crusading reputation, had reminded its readers that: 'Negroes ... look upon the police with the same distrust with which a conquered people views an army of occupation.'¹⁰⁰

Kilvinsky's fondness for sharing his home-spun philosophy with his young apprentice is re-emphasised through his espousal of what he describes as 'common sense' policing, guided by 'Kilvinsky's law', a credo which preaches respect for all citizens: 'I treat everyone the same, white or black. I'm civil to all people, courteous to none.' Although he advocates 'staying frosty' and advises against becoming an 'avenging angel', his world-view also reflects the necessity for a police officer to take charge of any situation and to protect himself by using whatever force is necessary: 'Kilvinsky's law says if a guy uses his fists, you use your stick. If he pulls out a knife, you use your gun and cancel his ticket right there.' Most of Kilvinsky's twenty years of service would inevitably have coincided with Parker's leadership and his simple guidelines provide a description of a police officer who would fit closely with Parker's public relations ideal: a white man who

⁹⁹ Escobar, 'Bloody Christmas and the Irony of Police Professionalism', pp. 198-99.

¹⁰⁰ 'Muslims and Police', *California Eagle*, 3 May 1962, p. 4.

is prepared to take charge of the scene but who discriminates between citizens on the grounds of behaviour rather than race. Unfortunately, evidence presented to the McCone Commission in 1965 suggested that the ‘command and control’ approach was difficult to reconcile with scrupulous observation of the boundaries of civility and appropriate use of force.¹⁰¹ Kilvinsky’s recipe for personal safety might look perfectly reasonable from the perspective of a police officer faced with a potentially violent suspect but could easily be perceived as advocacy of excessive use of force from the perspective of an arrestee.

Many of the incidents featured in *The New Centurions* involve white officers policing minority areas, predominantly those populated by African Americans but, although the new recruits are clearly unfamiliar with ‘negroes’ and apprehensive about their dealings with the black community, the main characters show no indications of discriminatory or abusive attitudes. The absence of such incidents, which was at odds with contemporary newspaper reports and with the findings of the McCone Commission, attracted the disdain of a columnist in *Variety* who claimed that the film: ‘avoids like the plague any real confrontation with the gray areas of modern-day citizen-police interactions which are at the seat of unrest.’¹⁰² Charles Champlin, the film critic of the *Los Angeles Times* was also strongly critical of the film’s approach to racial incidents which he anticipated would be greeted with resentment by the black community. Champlin argued that the film not only reflected ‘racial preconceptions which evidently exist in the heart of the LAPD’ but also condemned the way in which ‘it uses them (and events which flow from them) for the indiscriminate or comment-less ends of entertainment’, a point which is exemplified by two

¹⁰¹ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 219.

¹⁰² *Variety*, 26 July 1972, p. 14.

scenes involving Roy and Kilvinsky.¹⁰³ The officers are confronted by an errant African American motorist with multiple outstanding warrants who accuses them of harassment and flatly refuses to sign his citation or to accompany them to the station. He relents only after Roy appears to call for an ambulance and then, by brandishing his baton, clearly implies a willingness to use excessive force. Faced with the threat of a beating the offender agrees to get into the police car and, once he realises that the ambulance-call was never placed and that he has been hoodwinked, he joins the policeman in seeing the funny side of his situation. To use such a potentially controversial incident for humour suggests that the film's version of the inter-action between white cops and black men is a one-sided, white version of reality. The extent of the black community's real concern about police brutality had been reflected in an article published only six months before the film's release which reviewed the progress of a class-action, civil rights suit against the L.A.P.D. Initiated by the Western Center on Law and Poverty in the name of every black resident in Los Angeles County, this alleged 'a systematic campaign of brutality and harassment against blacks'. The article reported that the plaintiffs were willing to put the suit on hold, pending discussions with Chief Ed Davis on measures to ameliorate the situation.¹⁰⁴

In a subsequent scene, Kilvinsky demonstrates a jocular and community-friendly approach in his dealings with a group of African American prostitutes, who he keeps off the street for a few hours by rounding them up and driving them around in a police van. He admits that his actions are 'as illegal as hell' but sees them as more effective than arrests, which would only lead to misdemeanour charges, and he seems to have a rapport with the

¹⁰³ Charles Champlin, 'Centurions on a Curious Beat', *Los Angeles Times*, 3 August 1972, p. 11.

¹⁰⁴ Gene Blake, 'Blacks Plan to Drop Class Action Against L.A. Police', *Los Angeles Times*, 14 January 1972, pp. E1, E10.

working-girls, especially when he plies them with Scotch and milk. Champlin was also critical of this apparently well-intentioned act and argued that Kilvinsky's approach resembled 'a kindly patron forgiving his naughty children' and thus validated some traditional complaints of the black community including 'presumption of second-class citizenship' and 'the extra-legal handling they get at the hands of The Man.'¹⁰⁵

Despite these carefully controlled representations of inter-racial conflict, *The New Centurions* also provides glimpses of a more visceral form of racial hatred. When delivering a prostitute into Kilvinsky's care, an unnamed officer displays a style of policing which is more recognisably similar to the instances cited by the McCone Commission:

Prostitute: Nobody likes this honky devil, he don't know how to talk to a woman.
 Officer: Get in the wagon, bitch!
 Prostitute: You ain't going to get away with pushing me around, do you hear me.
 We gonna fix your white ass one day!

Then, a more serious incident illustrates how easily issues of law and order could become racially contested. When investigating an armed robbery of an African American-owned liquor store, Gus mistakenly shoots and kills the proprietor's father, who is himself carrying a gun while looking for the robbers in a dark alley. The store-owner is understandably distraught and screams 'Pig! Pig!' directly into Gus's face. Although the shooting of the innocent man is clearly unintentional, the film chooses to ignore its inevitable consequences, which would include an investigation and a review of the incident by a Shooting Board. *The New Centurions* was released at a time when the African American community in particular was voicing increasing concerns about the L.A.P.D.'s propensity to use deadly force and was questioning the validity of its internal assessments of the validity of officer-involved shootings. In the circumstances, the decision to omit any

¹⁰⁵ Champlin, 'Centurions on a Curious Beat', p. 11.

reference to investigatory action could be read as supporting the view that white police officers could shoot black suspects with impunity. Joe Domanick has pointed out that, from 1971 to 1979, the district attorney's office did not file charges against any officers who had been involved in shooting incidents, a statistic which helps to explain the concern which is evident in contemporary issues of the *Los Angeles Sentinel*.¹⁰⁶ In 1971 an article cited the A.C.L.U.'s claim that most slayings by police officers went unnoticed and suggested that officers had 'virtual carte blanche' to kill suspects in the course of their duty.¹⁰⁷ This situation had clearly not improved by 1975, when an editorial argued that investigations of officer-involved shootings reflected the prevailing view that 'the policeman must be protected' and that police officers had continued to shoot African Americans 'as though they had licenses for black game.'¹⁰⁸

Although white officers dominate its narrative, *The New Centurions* is noteworthy for its inclusion of black officers in its supporting cast. Throughout the 1960s and the early 1970s, African Americans accounted for seventeen percent of the population of Los Angeles but only five percent of the L.A.P.D. and it remained a rarity for a black man to progress through the ranks.¹⁰⁹ The officers who are visible in *The New Centurions* provide a reasonably accurate representation of contemporary L.A.P.D. demographics: everyone from Sergeant upwards is white and, in a group of approximately fourteen patrolmen, two are black while Sergio is the only identifiable Latino. African American officers are featured only as peripheral characters in the film, serving briefly as the butt of Kilvinsky's humour, which seems to be genial and well-intentioned rather than derogatory.

¹⁰⁶ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 270

¹⁰⁷ 'ACLU Charges Police Shootings Unnoticed', *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 3 June 1971, p. A1.

¹⁰⁸ 'Fight For Change', *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 7 August 1975, p. A6.

¹⁰⁹ Woods, *The Police in Los Angeles*, p. 235.

Wambaugh's own recollections of police attitudes at the time also indicate that the presence of African Americans was a marginal issue for most of his fellow officers: 'As to white cops, I feel that they were indifferent to the later efforts to recruit minorities.'¹¹⁰ For Chief Parker, however, this had been a more serious issue and he had refused to allow black officers to work in cars together with white officers until 1961, when pressure from Mayor Sam Yorty forced his hand.¹¹¹

Within the broader chronology of racial integration in the United States, Jackie Robinson had become the first black player in Major League Baseball in 1947 and, following the 1948 signature of Executive Order 9881, integration of the armed forces had been completed by 1954. Locally, throughout the 1960s, Los Angeles was notorious for its racially restrictive housing covenants and, as late as 1965, the *Los Angeles Times* had no black reporters on its staff.¹¹² As previously noted, the 1969 Mayoral campaign was dogged by rumours that victory for African American Tom Bradley would persuade many white L.A.P.D. officers to leave the force. The unexpected resignation of Chief Reddin at the end of 1968, after less than three years in the job, was a major stimulus to this speculation which Gerald Woods suggests was partly responsible for Sam Yorty's six-point margin of victory.¹¹³ Against this background one, very brief scene, in *The New Centurions*, when an African American officer is seen to be sharing a vehicle with a white colleague, is notable as the first cinematic version of a desegregated L.A.P.D. patrol car.

Another, even more sensitive, aspect of racial integration is highlighted in the film's closing scenes, when Roy becomes romantically involved with an African American

¹¹⁰ Wambaugh, e-mail to Robert Bevan, 5 February 2008.

¹¹¹ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, pp. 166-67.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 174.

¹¹³ Woods, *The Police in Los Angeles*, p. 248.

woman, a relationship which seems to be authentic and mutual, with no hint of sexual exploitation. Nevertheless, he has not yet felt sufficiently comfortable with his colleagues to introduce his girlfriend, or even to reveal that she is African American. By the end of the movie Roy is contemplating marriage but, five years after *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner* (1967) featured the first black-white screen-kiss of the modern era, he feels that the prevailing racial climate within the L.A.P.D. obliges him to conceal essential details of his private life from his friends and colleagues.

The film also provides the first extended representation of a Latino L.A.P.D. officer in the character of Sergio Duran. Wambaugh originally constructed Sergio as a conflicted character, a Chicano, born in Los Angeles to parents who were immigrants from Mexico, but with a definitively American upbringing. In his literary version of Sergio, there is no indication of a troubled childhood and little or no ability to speak Spanish and, for most of the novel, he seems to be trying to turn his back on his ethnicity, generally styling himself as 'Serge'. In the hands of the film-makers, this previously complex character becomes a stereotype and a fluent Spanish speaker. Charles Ramirez Berg has identified six classic Latino screen stereotypes, one of which is *el bandido*, traditionally exemplified in Westerns by the dark-skinned desperado with cartridge-belts across his chest and a sombrero on his head. In Berg's view the modern urban incarnation of this traditional villain is the Latino home-boy, or gang member, and in two scenes in which he features prominently, Sergio establishes his credentials for this role.¹¹⁴ In an early scene he boasts to a fellow officer of his youthful membership of the *Gavilanos* street gang. Then at the end of the film after breaking up a Latino gang fight he explains why he believes the L.A.P.D. are acting irrationally: 'I'm getting nine-ninety a month for bumping heads in gang fights. Nine-

¹¹⁴ Ramirez Berg, *Latino Images in Film*, pp. 38-43.

ninety a month! For what I used to do for free.’ Sergio is the only featured officer who is shown to lose his temper, using a club to wreck the car of some gang members who escaped arrest. Although the reduced importance of his role certainly limits the film’s opportunity to develop his character it appears that, in early-1970s Hollywood, a Latino who is working as a cop can only be represented as a juvenile offender who has gone straight, but who is still fundamentally hot-blooded and potentially violent.

While carrying the main story-line of the film, the characters of Roy and Kilvinky are also used to illustrate the psychological pressures of police work and their consequences, themes which would become increasingly important in later screen versions of Wambaugh’s works. For Kilvinsky, life as a police officer has been all-consuming, leaving him apparently ill-suited for sustaining non-professional relationships or for dealing with the challenges of life after retirement. His marriage long ago ended in divorce and, after a failed attempt to build a new life with his daughter and grandchild, he becomes a forlorn figure, clinging to memories of his life as an officer and unable to find any useful role outside the force. Through later exposition, we learn that Kilvinsky has chosen suicide as his way out, thus becoming the first cinematic L.A.P.D. officer to take his own life, albeit in retirement and off-screen.

Police suicide, either actual or contemplated, is a theme which runs throughout Wambaugh’s work and reflects his own, firmly held views that police officers are especially at risk of becoming suicidal. In personal correspondence, he has claimed that, in his experience, L.A.P.D. suicides outstrip ‘the number of officers who are murdered on duty.’¹¹⁵ Statistics regarding the occurrence of police suicides are not widely available, but the available evidence suggests that Wambaugh exaggerates the significance of suicide in

¹¹⁵ Wambaugh, e-mail to Robert Bevan, 29 January 2009.

the hierarchy of risks faced by police officers. For example, a review of deaths among the approximately six thousand officers serving in the L.A.P.D. from 1970 to 1977 identified only four instances of officers taking their own lives, implying a average annual suicide rate over this eight-year period of eight per hundred thousand.¹¹⁶ Within the same time period, the Los Angeles Police Memorial Foundation lists nine officer deaths as a result of gunfire and a further seven as a result of transportation accidents. The same source indicates that, in the years from 1945 until 2000, a total of one hundred and thirteen L.A.P.D. officers died in the line of duty, giving an average annual rate which is roughly equivalent to twenty-seven per hundred thousand.¹¹⁷ To place these figures in context, suicide rates in the United States are heavily skewed towards white men who, in recent years, have killed themselves at an average annual rate of twenty per hundred thousand compared with a rate for the population at large of eleven per hundred thousand.¹¹⁸ In fairness to Wambaugh, it should be noted that some psychiatrists have made qualitative arguments which support the idea that the nature of police work may well increase the risk of suicide, while roughly half of his fictional suicides involve retired officers, for whom no statistics are available.¹¹⁹ In modern police forces, substantial resources are devoted to assessing and monitoring the psychological well-being of officers and providing help to those suffering from work related stress or trauma. Nevertheless, by the end of the

¹¹⁶ Martin Reiser, *Police Psychology: Collected Papers* (Los Angeles: LEHI Publishing Company, 1982), p. 171.

¹¹⁷ Los Angeles Police Memorial Foundation, found at <<http://www.lapmf.org/fallenofficers.htm>> on 3 January 2009.

¹¹⁸ K.D. Kochanek, S.L. Murphy, R. N. Anderson and C. Scott, 'Deaths: Final data for 2002', *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 53 (5) (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 2004).

¹¹⁹ John M. Violanti and Steven J. Roth, Letters to the Editor, *American Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 161, no. 4, April 2004, pp. 766-67.

twentieth century, the sight of a distressed police officer, holding his own gun in his mouth, had become a familiar sight in the cinema.¹²⁰

Despite the distortions caused by its pro-police perspective, by its relatively patronising approach to race relations and by its temporal dislocation, *The New Centurions* marked the beginning of significant changes in the way that Hollywood represented L.A.P.D. officers on screen. Its illustrations of prostitution and homosexuality heralded a new era of increasingly frank representations of sex crimes and, by representing police work in areas of the inner city which Hollywood movies had previously ignored, it exposed audiences to the long standing tensions between the police and the racial minorities of Los Angeles. The increased visibility of people of colour, as criminals, as the victims of crime and in the ranks of the police, coupled with the frank acknowledgement of imperfections in the characters of police officers, signalled new possibilities for police movies. In the aftermath of a major racial disturbance, which had brought death and destruction to the streets of Watts, and following the savage indictment of the L.A.P.D. as an agency of oppression in *Sweetback*, a mainstream Hollywood police movie had at last acknowledged the existence of the minority communities of Los Angeles and had illustrated the challenges faced by a predominantly white force in the policing of the inner city.

¹²⁰ Both *The Choirboys* and *The Onion Field* also deal with actual or attempted suicides by police officers. Other examples include Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson) in *Lethal Weapon* and Eldon Perry (Kurt Russell) in *Dark Blue*.

5. *The Choirboys* (1977)

Civilians have seldom understood the real danger inherent in police work. It has never been particularly hazardous to the body, not since Sir Robert Peel first organized his corps of bobbies. This line of work has always been a threat to the spirit.

Joseph Wambaugh, *Echoes in the Darkness*.¹²¹

Although many screen adaptations have failed to emulate the critical or commercial success of the best-selling novels on which they are based, only rarely has a film generated as much rancour between novelist and film-makers as *The Choirboys*. Joseph Wambaugh publicly disowned the movie and, incensed by what he saw as a misrepresentation of his novel, engaged in a number of legal actions against its producers that eventually produced a settlement in his favour for \$1,000,000.¹²² Wambaugh's disdain for the film has not diminished over the intervening years, and in personal correspondence he has remained reluctant to engage in any discussion of the movie which he dismisses as a 'dreadful cartoon'.¹²³ He has been much more willing to talk about his novel, which uses a string of darkly comic interludes to illustrate the underlying stress and tensions of the officers' daily working lives, tensions which ultimately lead to two tragic deaths and the ruin of several careers and reputations. The film adaptation, described by Wambaugh as 'crass, disjointed and unwatchable', mostly consists of a string of crude comic scenes, rather akin to the 'frat-boy' behaviours on show in movies such as *Animal House* (1978) and *Police Academy* (1984).¹²⁴ Although each of the individual incidents is relatively faithful to the original text, by omitting much of the psychological background of the characters, the film fails to provide convincing reasons for their actions. Crucially, the novel's dismal conclusion is rejected in favour of a typically upbeat Hollywood ending, and its Los Angeles setting is

¹²¹ Joseph Wambaugh, *Echoes in the Darkness* (London: Bartram, 1987), p. i.

¹²² James Robert Parish, *The Great Cop Pictures* (Metuchen, NJ and London: Scarecrow Press, 1990), p. 109.

¹²³ Wambaugh, e-mail to Robert Bevan, 29 January 2008.

¹²⁴ Parish, *The Great Cop Pictures*, p. 110.

also disavowed, locating the characters in an unnamed California city as members of the ‘Metropolitan Police’. Nevertheless, as the film critic of the *Los Angeles Times* observed, Los Angeles is clearly identifiable, both as a visual location and by the presence of real place-names in the script.¹²⁵

Savaged by Wambaugh and panned by most contemporary critics, *The Choirboys* also produced disappointing box-office results. Despite its many deficiencies, the film’s portrayal of the L.A.P.D. in the 1970s engages with several issues which, at the time of its release, were prominent in local discourses of law enforcement. Most significantly, the film emulates Wambaugh’s novel in revealing the presence of a macho sub-culture, within which the brutality, racism and homophobia of a few was tolerated by many. Its varied cast of characters allows *The Choirboys* to portray a wider range of personal behaviours within the ranks of the police than any of its cinematic predecessors and thus offers insights into many of the challenges facing the L.A.P.D. in the 1970s and beyond. A variety of white male responses to the rights and expectations of racial minorities, women and homosexuals are apparent and, for the first time, a filmic L.A.P.D. officer is also a traumatised veteran of the Vietnam conflict.

‘Choir Practice’ is a coded reference to the drunken debauches which a group of uniformed officers use to relieve the pressures of police work. The ten regular members of the Choir are patrolmen based at the Hollywood Station, most of whom are military veterans and whose racial composition accurately mirrors that of the L.A.P.D. in the 1970s. Their acknowledged leader is Whalen (Charles Durning), a long-serving officer within six months of retirement, who is joined by seven other white officers, notably including Rules

¹²⁵ Kevin Thomas, ‘Choirboys Hums Different Tune, *Los Angeles Times*, 23 December 1977, p. G18.

(Tim McIntyre), Slate (Perry King), Bloomguard (James Woods) and Niles (Don Stroud). Their numbers are completed by Motts (Louis Gossett Junior), a cool, hip African American and Tanaguchi (Clyde Kusatsu), a Japanese American who was raised in a Latino community and whose role is largely confined to comic relief. Although much of the film is devoted to crude comedy, at the core of its story are the linked tragedies of a police officer's suicide and its aftermath, in which a drunken and traumatised fellow officer accidentally shoots an innocent young man.

This tragic ending is prefigured by an opening sequence set in Vietnam in 1969, where Niles and Bloomguard share a combat experience which will come back to haunt them as police officers. Pursued by Vietcong troops wielding flame-throwers, they hide in a cave, only for Niles to become claustrophobic and panic-stricken. Bloomguard's embrace calms Niles' fears and narrowly saves the pair from detection and certain death. The two buddies then follow a familiar career path for ex-marines when they enlist as L.A.P.D. officers and are assigned to the same division. As active members of 'the Choir', they become friends with Baxter Slate, a tortured and ultimately suicidal individual. Although the novel explains Slate's guilt as a product of his experience as a Juvenile Officer, when his failure to detect domestic abuse led to the murder of a young child, the film reveals little about his background. A product of a broken home, he briefly mentions his difficulty in reconciling his experiences as a police officer with the Manichean approach to right and wrong which he gained from the Jesuit boarding schools of his childhood. He is shown to be abusing alcohol and drugs, while his sexual partners include an exotic dancer and a dominatrix. Unaware of Slate's involvement, Niles enters an apartment which he suspects is being used for prostitution and, to his horror, finds Slate in manacles with his back bloodied by flagellation. Although Niles is willing to keep the matter confidential, he is

unable to respond when, in an obvious cry for help, Slate asks him to meet and talk over his problems. Shortly afterwards, Slate commits suicide and, at a subsequent Choir practice in the park, a still-distraught Niles becomes hopelessly drunk and is left inside a police van to sleep it off. Unfortunately, Rules locks the van door and, when Niles wakes, the confined space causes him to panic and hallucinate. His screams attract the attention of Alexander, a teenage homosexual who has been cruising the park but, when he tries to help by opening the van door, Niles pictures the young man as the Vietcong of his nightmares and opens fire.

Sam Niles thus represents the first cinematic L.A.P.D. officer to display symptoms of P.T.S.D. or, as it was more normally described in the Seventies, Vietnam Syndrome. Wambaugh would revisit this issue in more depth in *The Onion Field*, his documentary account of the case of Karl Hettinger, an L.A.P.D. detective who was traumatised by the murder of his partner but whose psychological problems were unrecognised, leading to alcoholism, suicidal tendencies and kleptomania. Neither in Hettinger's case, nor in the fictional example of Niles set eleven years later, is there any sign that the L.A.P.D. recognised P.T.S.D. as an illness.

Despite the significance of Niles' symptoms, *The Choirboys* engages most directly, and controversially, with contemporary issues through the character of Roscoe Rules, a brutal, homophobic racist who is completely unconcerned for the feelings and well-being of his colleagues or of the citizens whom he is paid to protect. Rules is contemptuous of the community which he polices and his behaviour is headstrong, insensitive and incompetent, a potentially lethal mixture in a police officer. His colleagues consider him 'an insufferable prick', but their contempt is assuaged by his ability to enliven choir practice with supplies of free alcohol which he manages to cajole from liquor stores on his beat. His incompetence

as a police officer is demonstrated throughout the movie. At the scene of a potential suicide he effectively ensures the death of a young black woman, initially by suggesting that she is merely seeking attention and then by dismissing her as a ‘ding-a-ling’. In a fatal attempt to employ reverse psychology, his final words before her death are: ‘Just go ahead bitch, jump!’ Then, in a dispute between a Mexican and an African American he turns a routine argument into a minor riot, first by describing the Mexican’s wife as a *cholo* hooker and then by ripping the moustache from the Mexican’s bloodied lip.¹²⁶ Finally, his beating of the Mexican with his baton provokes blacks and Hispanics to unite in attacking himself and his partner. Although Rules’ vocabulary of racial descriptions includes ‘nigger’, ‘Uncle Remus’, ‘greaseball’ and ‘gook’, in one scene he is shown receiving an exceptional service award, prompting Motts to stage-whisper: ‘What is this, bigot of the month club?’ After Slate’s death, Rules’ insensitivity leads him to reveal loudly and repeatedly that Baxter’s body carried whip marks, which for him is a matter of laughter and scorn: ‘like a damn pervert!’ His complete lack of compassion infuriates the still-grieving Niles and sets off the chain of events which culminates in the shooting of Alexander.

Rules’ on-screen activities epitomise the worst fears of African Americans and Latinos regarding controversial aspects of L.A.P.D. behaviour and provide film-goers with a striking representation of white racism and brutality within its ranks. Although there is no suggestion that any of Rules’ colleagues share his views, neither is there any sign of an attempt within their sub-culture to constrain his extremism. The type of behaviour which he exhibits was highlighted by the McCone Commission in 1966 and would persist throughout the Seventies and Eighties, leading the Christopher Commission, in its report on the

¹²⁶ In modern American usage, *cholo* indicates a person associated with Latino gang culture.

Rodney King beating, to echo most of the earlier criticisms. One scene in particular, in which Rules boasts to his partner about a recent violent arrest, illustrates an issue which, within the next few years, would become a major point of controversy:

Rules: Then I made him do the chicken.

Dean: Do what?

Rules: The choke hold. You know, when you choke 'em out and they pass out and get convulsions and maybe flop around on the floor making funny noises. It's funny as hell to see. (Rules begins shaking his head around and imitating a chicken.)

The choke hold was an approved, albeit controversial, L.A.P.D. procedure intended to subdue anyone resisting arrest, involving pressure against the suspect's throat from an officer's forearm or from his baton, a manoeuvre which would frequently cause loss of consciousness. In boasting of his expertise with the choke hold, Rules gives cinematic exposure to a long-running controversy which, in 1982, would come to a head when James Mincy, an African American, died while being similarly restrained. Between 1975 and 1982, L.A.P.D. officers killed fifteen suspects while using the choke hold while, over the same time period, no other major American city experienced more than one fatality from the same manoeuvre.¹²⁷ Eleven of the deaths involved African Americans and Lou Cannon has suggested that the black community suspected officers of occasionally using the hold to humiliate blacks by causing them to 'do the chicken'.¹²⁸ Under criticism following Mincy's death, Chief Gates ignited an angry debate over this issue when he set out to defend his officers: 'We may be finding that in some blacks when it [the chokehold] is applied the veins or the arteries do not open as fast as they do in normal people'.¹²⁹ The outcry which followed this disastrous choice of words led the *Los Angeles Sentinel* to demand that Gates

¹²⁷ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 265.

¹²⁸ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, p. 95.

¹²⁹ Gates and Shah, *Chief*, p. 249.

be relieved of his command and resulted in the Police Commission imposing a ban on the use of the choke hold unless an officer felt that his life was in imminent danger.¹³⁰ In 1989, the choke hold would acquire more wide-spread cinematic notoriety in *Do The Right Thing*, in which the climactic burning of Sal's Pizza was triggered by African American anger at the death of Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn) who, while resisting arrest, was 'choked out' by a white police officer. Ironically, at the 1992 trial of the officers who had beaten Rodney King, the prohibition of the choke hold was highlighted by the defence as one of the factors which led the arresting officers to rely upon multiple baton blows in order to subdue King.¹³¹

Wambaugh insists that, in the character of Roscoe Rules, he created an object of ridicule, 'who is always getting knocked on his ass, either physically or metaphorically' and that, by making his actions 'excessive and way over-the-top', he was 'using the tools of satire and hyperbole to make serious points.'¹³² He suggests that, in the 'emotionally traumatic' environment of big-city police work, the insensitivity of characters like Rules provides a psychological self-preservation mechanism which is missing in more sensitive characters like Slate. Despite the novelist's intentions, the cinematic version of Rules was condemned by local film critics. Bridget Byrne of the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, described him as 'the most bigoted of the cops' who treated minorities 'like scum', while Kevin Thomas of the *Los Angeles Times* echoed Byrne's view by labelling Rules as a

¹³⁰ James H. Cleaver, 'Chief Daryl Gates Must Go ... Right NOW!', *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 13 May 1982, pp. A1, D1.

¹³¹ Timothy Wind, one of the officers subsequently indicted, had failed a baton-proficiency test only hours before his involvement in the King beating.

¹³² Wambaugh, e-mail to Robert Bevan, 31 January 2008.

‘vicious bigot’.¹³³ Twelve years after the Watts riot, the continuing tensions between the L.A.P.D. and minority communities on the streets of Los Angeles indicated that, despite the warnings of the McCone Commission, the still-predominantly white police force had failed to adapt to the needs of an increasingly multi-racial city. In the cinema, Robert Aldrich’s heavy-handed attempts at humour in *The Choirboys* resulted in a filmic version of Roscoe Rules which, belying Wambaugh’s satirical intentions, provided audiences with a combination of racism and brutality which exemplified many of the problems that McCone had identified and that would remain unresolved until, some fourteen years later, they would be revealed to a worldwide audience through the video-taped beating of Rodney King.

Rules’ bigotry reaches beyond racism to homophobia and his extreme prejudice is on display in a number of scenes which also serve to illustrate the contemporary tensions between the law, policing and homosexuality. Homosexual men, regularly described as ‘fruits’ or ‘faggots’, feature prominently in *The Choirboys* and seem to occupy a great deal of police time, reflecting both the increased freedom to portray sexual issues on screen, and the limited contemporary tolerance for homosexuality by the law and by the L.A.P.D. Although the Stonewall riots in Greenwich Village in 1969 had highlighted the potential for conflict between the police and the newly assertive gay community, until the Consenting Adults Bill was passed in May 1975, California law continued to prohibit sodomy, a broadly defined offence which encompassed oral sex. Section 647 of the California Penal Code, which prohibited lewd conduct in a public place, was the usual basis for action against homosexuals although, since 1962, when the California Supreme Court had ruled

¹³³ Bridget Byrne, ‘*The Choirboys*: They Don’t Come Any Worse’, *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 23 December 1977, no page reference provided, *The Choirboys*, Clippings File, Margaret Herrick Library; Thomas, ‘*Choirboys* Hums Different Tune’, p. G18.

that a locked lavatory cubicle was a private place, arrests had become more difficult to obtain.¹³⁴ Nevertheless, a study of arrests under Section 647 for 1972 indicated that ninety-seven percent of those arrested were male homosexuals and that, in almost all cases, the arrests were as a result of police activity rather than public complaints.¹³⁵

Predictably, Rules' character represents the extreme of intolerance towards 'goddamn faggots', and a more sympathetic view towards homosexuality is provided by Scuzzi (Burt Reynolds), the Sergeant in charge of the Vice Squad. When Alexander, the gay teenager who would later be shot by Niles, is arrested for propositioning an undercover vice officer, Scuzzi decides to release him without charge in exchange for Alexander's promise to behave in the future. The following conversation indicates Scuzzi's attitude:

Scuzzi: How long have you had this problem?

Alexander: I've known for three years that I'm gay. I don't know why, I just am.

Scuzzi: Look kid, I'm not an expert in this field. But I gotta think you should get some advice.

Thus, even the most understanding of the cinematic police officers refers to homosexuality as a psychological problem which may be curable. In 1973, under pressure from the Gay Liberation Front, the American Psychiatric Association had rescinded their official view of homosexuality as a mental disorder and reclassified it as a sexual orientation. By 1975, this enlightened perspective was obviously not yet shared by the L.A.P.D. leadership, either on film or in reality.¹³⁶ Chief Parker had regularly echoed Senator Joseph R. McCarthy in linking homosexuality and communism and Chief Davis was renowned for his refusal to countenance the hiring of homosexual police officers and

¹³⁴ *Bielicki v. Superior Court*, 57 Cal.2d 602 (1962).

¹³⁵ Dave Smith, 'Gays Fight Discrimination, Uncertain Laws', *Los Angeles Times*, 25 March 1974, p. A3.

¹³⁶ Boyer *et al* (eds.), *The Enduring Vision*, p. 913.

for his frequent homophobic public comments. In a 1974 *Los Angeles Times* article, he had linked homosexuality with the seduction of young boys and, while professing his ‘sympathy for anyone afflicted with such a faulty development’, had suggested that: ‘It’s one thing to be a leper and it’s another thing to be spreading the disease’.¹³⁷ Many years later, in its assessment of bias within the L.A.P.D., the Christopher Commission would cite an internal L.A.P.D. memorandum on recruitment, dated 1975, which had confirmed that ‘the disqualification of police applicants based on substantiated homosexual conduct must be continued.’¹³⁸ More seriously, its investigations concluded that, even in 1991, many officers were more likely to dispense harsh treatment to gay and lesbian offenders than to ‘straight’ suspects. Despite these indications of deep-rooted, institutional homophobia, Wambaugh makes the point that, operationally speaking, the attention which the L.A.P.D. paid to homosexuals in the Seventies can also be interpreted as simple pragmatism. Arrests for lewd conduct were cheap and easy to obtain and were thus popular with station-commanders as a method of padding statistics.¹³⁹

This rather cynical interpretation is made more plausible by the highly critical way in which the film portrays ‘the brass’. The Lieutenants are incompetent, self-serving ‘yes-men’, while the authoritarian Deputy Chief is apparently motivated by an overwhelming concern to protect his own public image. Any organisation which honours a character such as Roscoe Rules must either be out of touch with reality or observing an unsustainable code of conduct, and the ceremony at which Rules receives his commendation has a distinctly militaristic flavour. It concludes with a speech by the Deputy Chief in which he attacks the

¹³⁷ Smith, ‘Gays Fight Discrimination, Uncertain Laws’, p. A3.

¹³⁸ *Report of the Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department*, p. 88, found at <http://www.parc.info/client_files/Special%20Reports/1%20-%20Christopher%20Commision.pdf> on 24 May 2010.

¹³⁹ Wambaugh, e-mail to Robert Bevan, 29 January 2008.

attorneys who have just secured the acquittal of a drug-dealer who killed an undercover officer, on the grounds that the officer failed to identify himself. The Deputy Chief then launches an attack on the justice system, coupled with a call for a return to 'hard-fisted government' as a rallying call for his troops. As a Sergeant observes, his words have the effect of turning a relatively placid group into 'seething blue avengers'.

The Choirboys is essentially a film about a group of men, many of whom are either single or divorced, who use alcohol, drugs and sex as a means of escaping from the pressures of work and, in their overwhelmingly male environment, the women who feature most prominently are cocktail waitresses and prostitutes. Female police officers are rendered invisible in the workplace and, when they make cameo appearances in social settings, their treatment is predictably sexist. They are given disparaging nicknames, such as 'Dickless Tracy' or 'No-balls Hadley' and are subject to crude sexual advances and constant innuendo. Although *Dragnet* (1954) had deliberately showcased a woman police officer operating undercover in a criminal investigation, that representation, although technically correct, did not reflect common practice and the macho sub-culture which is on display in *The Choirboys* is a more accurate representation of contemporary gender politics in the L.A.P.D. Janis Appier has argued that, in adopting the concept of 'the war on crime', the L.A.P.D. had effectively marginalised policewomen by reaffirming masculine values of strength and aggression. Despite becoming, as early as 1910, the first force in the country to employ a policewoman, by the end of World War II less than one percent of the L.A.P.D. was female, a figure which had risen to just over two percent by 1979.¹⁴⁰ By that time, feminist advances had stimulated increased pressure by women officers against sexist employment practices in the L.A.P.D. and the issue became so controversial that, for a

¹⁴⁰ Appier, *Policing Women*, pp. 164-65; Woods, *The Police in Los Angeles*, p. 264.

four-year period, Chief Davis refused to hire any women. In 1971 he remarked that women did not belong in patrol cars and could not be trusted with guns ‘at that time of the month’, while Wambaugh himself provides anecdotal evidence that Davis’ thoughts were shared by the rank and file.¹⁴¹ He attests that: ‘Lots of male cops resented working with women, believing that they would put their male partner in danger by not being able to pull their weight.’¹⁴² At that time, women in the L.A.P.D. were not eligible for ranks above Sergeant but, in 1972, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act prohibited employment discrimination on grounds of race, creed, colour or sex, prompting Sergeant Fanchon Blake to file a lawsuit requiring the L.A.P.D. to allow her to take the promotional examination. Blake’s legal action, which followed an unsuccessful four-year campaign with the city council, was not resolved until 1980 when the L.A.P.D. accepted the validity of her claim, along with two Consent Decrees which set targets for increased hiring of women and minorities. By 1986, more aggressive recruiting resulted in thirteen percent of sworn officers being comprised of policewomen but evidence suggests that male officers continued to be unenthusiastic about their presence on patrol. In his testimony to the Christopher Commission, which reported on the Rodney King affair, Chief Daryl Gates admitted that prejudice remained and, in its report, the Commission itself noted the continuing discrimination against policewomen.¹⁴³

Despite its vilification by Wambaugh and its general disparagement by contemporary critics, *The Choirboys* illustrates the significant gulf between the conduct of some officers and the increasingly diverse communities which they served. Released at the chronological midpoint between the reports of the McCone Commission and the

¹⁴¹ Sonia Nazario, ‘A Force to Be Reckoned With’, *Los Angeles Times*, 5 June 1993, Metro Desk, p. 1.

¹⁴² Wambaugh, e-mail to Robert Bevan, 5 February 2008.

¹⁴³ Appier, *Policing Women*, pp. 168-70.

Christopher Commission, the film exposes the struggles of the L.A.P.D. to come to terms with the increased aspirations of minority communities and with the increasing permissiveness of American society. Although widely regarded as both a commercial and artistic failure, *The Choirboys* nevertheless makes an identifiable contribution to contemporary discourses of law enforcement through its representations of brutality, racism, homophobia and sexism within the L.A.P.D. while, through the character of Roscoe Rules, it provides a cinematic warning of real-life disasters which lie ahead.

6. *The Onion Field* (1979)

... police work is a high stress occupation which affects, shapes and also scars the individuals and families involved.

Dr. Martin Reiser, L.A.P.D. Psychologist.¹⁴⁴

On 9 March 1963, L.A.P.D. Detectives Ian Campbell and Karl Hettinger were abducted at gunpoint by two minor criminals and were forced to drive to the outskirts of Bakersfield, a city approximately one hundred miles to the north of Los Angeles. Their journey ended in the darkness of an isolated farm-track where, in a few dramatic moments, Campbell was shot and, in the ensuing confusion, Hettinger managed to escape. The killers, Greg Powell and Jimmy Smith, were quickly arrested and, although initially sentenced to death, contrived to avoid the gas chamber through a series of appeals and re-trials which dragged through the criminal courts until the final months of 1969 and which, collectively, comprised the longest trial-sequence in Californian judicial history. This notorious murder and its aftermath made a deep impression on Detective Sergeant Joseph Wambaugh and, in 1972, he took a six-month leave of absence from the L.A.P.D. to write *The Onion Field*, a factual account of the tragic events which became an instant best-seller and which is regarded by Wambaugh as a critical step in his writing-career: ‘I was put on Earth to write *The Onion Field* ... It was such an emotional experience for me ... I read 40,000 pages of court transcripts; I interviewed about 63 people and wrote the book in three months.’¹⁴⁵ By 1974, the book’s success had led Wambaugh to resign from the L.A.P.D. and to become a professional writer and, when the time came to produce a cinematic adaptation of *The Onion Field*, his bitterness over Hollywood’s treatment of *The Choirboys* led him to invest

¹⁴⁴ Reiser, *Police Psychology*, p. 125.

¹⁴⁵ Mandalit Del Barco, ‘Joe Wambaugh: The Writer Who Redefined LAPD’, 18 July 2008, found at <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=92649123>> on 14 December 2009.

\$750,000 of his own money into the project. In making the film, Wambaugh and director Harold Becker set out to portray a factual version of events, rather than a fictional drama with a real-life event at its centre and, to underline the point, the film opens with the on-screen statement: ‘THIS IS A TRUE STORY’.¹⁴⁶ Although this decision to concentrate on the facts of the case resulted in what many critics described as a tedious cinematic experience, it also ensured that the audience were exposed to filmic illustrations of a number of issues which, at the time of the film’s release, had become significant topics of civil discourse.

Like most of Wambaugh’s fictional characters, Hettinger (John Savage) and Campbell (Ted Danson) are portrayed as essentially unheroic figures. Both had served as Marines in Korea, but in communications rather than in battle, and both had dropped out of their originally chosen professions to become police officers. Hettinger had once been enrolled at agricultural college and still dreamed of a quieter life as a tomato farmer, while Campbell had been following his father’s footsteps in medical school but had now enrolled in studies of police science and law, while spending his spare time playing the bagpipes. Both men were married, Campbell being the father of two girls while Hettinger’s wife was pregnant with their first child. The circumstances of their abduction were tragically mundane. Observing Powell and Smith driving around a residential area at night, the officers decided to pull the car over to take a look. They approached the vehicle holding flashlights and without anticipating any armed resistance during what they assumed was a relatively routine stop. Unfortunately, after Powell ‘got the jump’ on Campbell and held him at gunpoint, Hettinger, who had belatedly trained his own weapon on Smith, was then

¹⁴⁶ Joseph Wambaugh in ‘Return to the Onion Field’, a special feature in the DVD, *Joseph Wambaugh’s The Onion Field*, (Kinowelt Home Entertainment, 2002).

persuaded by Campbell to surrender his firearm: ‘He’s got a gun in my back. Give him yours, Karl.’ Wambaugh suggests that Hettinger’s action in agreeing to surrender his firearm was entirely rational, since there was no obvious reason for the policemen to be killed, and there had been many recorded instances of officers surrendering their weapons in order to survive.¹⁴⁷ Nevertheless, although murder was an unlikely and unpredictable outcome of this accidental encounter, his decision to hand over his gun would become a major point of controversy within the L.A.P.D.

With the officers under their control, Powell and Smith ordered Campbell and Hettinger to drive towards Bakersfield. At the beginning of the journey, Powell assured his captives that they would be abandoned, unharmed, in an isolated spot and even agreed to Hettinger’s request to leave their guns behind for them to recover once he and Smith had made their escape. However, during the drive, Powell’s inadequate understanding of the ‘Little Lindbergh’ law led him to convince himself that armed kidnapping itself carried the death penalty, a misinterpretation which persuaded him to commit murder.¹⁴⁸ After coming to a halt alongside an onion field, the two officers were ordered to get out of the car. Campbell was shot once in the face by Powell and was then shot four times in the body, by either Powell or Smith, while Hettinger ran for his life and escaped into the darkness.

From this point onwards, the main focus of the film is the destabilisation of Karl Hettinger by three sources of emotional stress: the horrific circumstances of the crime itself, the insensitive reactions of the L.A.P.D. to a traumatised officer and the Kafka-esque

¹⁴⁷ Wambaugh, *The Onion Field*, p. 261.

¹⁴⁸ The Federal Kidnapping Act of 1933, introduced following the abduction and murder of Charles Lindbergh’s infant son, allowed Federal authorities to pursue kidnappers across state lines and empowered states to change their laws to demand the death penalty if a kidnap victim was harmed. In 1960, Caryl Chessman was executed under this California law after serving twelve years on Death Row. Powell apparently persuaded himself that an abduction involving the use of firearms would automatically be treated as a capital crime.

workings of the California legal system which required him to testify to the circumstances of the murder on eleven separate occasions, spread over seven years. Hettinger's psychological fragility manifests itself in increasingly serious symptoms beginning with frequent flashbacks in which he recalls Campbell's murder and which are accompanied by an increasing variety of physical ailments, including a stiff neck, headaches, and impotence. At his lowest point, while alone with his two children, Hettinger strikes his crying infant son and then, on the verge of suicide, places his gun in his mouth only to be saved by the inadvertent interruption of his young daughter.

In modern police forces, the potential danger posed to officers by P.T.S.D., with its associated risks of amnesia, depression and suicidal tendencies, is well-recognised. An article on this subject, which chose to illustrate its argument with the case of Karl Hettinger, was published in the *F.B.I. Law Enforcement Bulletin* in 2004 and made the following observation: 'Overall the traumatic threat imposed on an unwilling victim by an aggressor can produce multiple cognitive and behavioural abnormalities for the rest of that person's life.' The same article noted that the process of healing begins with 'the first law enforcement officer to make contact with the victim' and stressed the importance of not appearing to blame the victim for the events experienced. Finally the article concludes that: 'A victim's seemingly odd reaction to the trauma directly results from the fact that the person had no choice but to adopt this form of behaviour.'¹⁴⁹

The L.A.P.D. is widely acknowledged as having pioneered the use of behavioural psychology in police work but, unfortunately for Hettinger, this process did not begin until 1968, when Dr. Martin Reiser was appointed to the position of Police Psychologist. James

¹⁴⁹ Ryan E. Melsky, 'Identification with the Aggressor: How Crime Victims Often Cope with Trauma' in *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, August 2004, found at <<http://www.fbi.gov/publications/leb/2004/august04/august04leb.htm>> on 18 April 2009.

T. Reese and B.M. Hodinko have described Reiser as the ‘father of police psychology’ and credit him with ‘blazing trails for mental health professionals to follow’, especially in the area of counseling and therapy for officers and their families.¹⁵⁰ Although symptoms such as ‘shell-shock’ and ‘battle fatigue’ had been identified in both World Wars, general recognition of P.T.S.D. would not occur until the Eighties as a result of investigations of military veterans with ‘Post-Vietnam Syndrome’, while the invasion of Panama in 1988 marked the first occasion on which returning U.S. troops were provided with counselling by mental health professionals.

Reiser was clearly ahead of his contemporaries in recognising the issue and, in a work published in 1973, provided a succinct description of the symptoms which Hettinger had experienced together with a set of guidelines for the sensitive handling of such cases.¹⁵¹ Under his influence, the L.A.P.D. became the first major police force to treat work-related psychological disability in the same way as disability arising from physical injury and, as a result, allowed affected officers to retire on full pension, irrespective of years of service. In 1977, a *Los Angeles Times* article quoted L.A.P.D. psychologist Dr, Susan Saxe in reporting that thirty officers had retired on stress-related disability pensions in that year, an increase from eighteen in the previous year.¹⁵² By 1985, the L.A.P.D. was awarding these ‘psych pensions’ at a rate of thirty-five per year, many of them to young officers who were

¹⁵⁰ James T. Reese, and B.M. Hodinko, ‘Police Psychological Services: A History’, in James. T. Reese, J. M. Horn, and C. Dunning (eds.), *Critical incidents in policing* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1990), pp. 297-310.

¹⁵¹ Martin Reiser, *Practical Psychology for Police Officers* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1973), pp. 48-65, 66-77.

¹⁵² ‘Staff Psychologist’s Opinion: Crime and Criminals May Plague Police but Job Stress is Now the Biggest Woe’, *Los Angeles Times*, 8 December 1977, p. CS10. In 1981, Mark Fuhrman filed an unsuccessful application for a psychiatric disability pension. Fuhrman continued as a serving officer until 1995, when his infamous perjury and racism undermined an apparently overwhelming prosecution case in the murder trial of O.J. Simpson (Matt Lait, ‘LAPD-Style’, *Los Angeles Times*, 22 February 1998, p.16.).

granted a tax-free, lifetime pension equivalent to the entitlement normally earned from a thirty-year period of service. This practice came to represent a significant budgetary strain, obliging the L.A.P.D. to take a much harder line on qualification, a policy which, by 1986, produced a marked decline in successful applicants.¹⁵³ The underlying tension in this situation was dramatised in *Lethal Weapon* through a sub-plot involving the mental state of an L.A.P.D. detective. Martin Riggs, who demonstrates an apparently suicidal disregard for his own life, has been exposed to two separate sources of psychological stress: he is a veteran of Special Forces service in Vietnam and has recently lost his wife in tragic circumstances. Although a police psychologist is convinced that Riggs is genuinely disturbed and should be removed from active service, his more-cynical Captain suspects him of feigning mental instability in order to secure a disability pension.

In 2011, the L.A.P.D. has its own Behavioural Sciences Unit which employs seventeen psychologists, providing counselling and training in the management of stress and anger and in suicide prevention.¹⁵⁴ However, in 1963, these issues were not well understood and for Hettinger there was no official recognition of his trauma, nor any clinically-based attempt to heal the psychological wounds of the shooting. Instead, as the film demonstrates, the official reactions of the command structure play a significant part in Hettinger's destabilisation. First he is asked to speak to all the roll-calls at the station in order to explain what he did wrong: 'If you just tell them how you guys fouled up, I mean, you can't bring Ian back, but, if you just tell them all the things you guys did wrong, all the things you wish you had done, it just might save the lives of some of those boys in there.'

¹⁵³ Woods, *The Police in Los Angeles*, p. 261.

¹⁵⁴ L.A.P.D. Behavioural Science Services found at <http://www.lapdonline.org/search_results/content_basic_view/6497> on 6 February 2011.

His decision to hand over his gun to Powell is then formally documented as an error of judgement in the L.A.P.D.'s training programme and its operating manual, both of which are re-written to confirm that officers should never surrender their weapon. This approach is roundly criticised by a veteran officer who admits that, in the past, he had elected to surrender his own weapon at gun-point and had survived to tell the tale. He insists that the authority to make such life and death decisions in the heat of the moment must be left with the cop on the street: 'One thing that was sacred, you might say. And that is that you're the boss out there. You know what you should'a done at the time you did it.' Despite this pragmatic expression of support for Hettinger from an experienced officer, 'the brass' are less forgiving. His Captain announces to the assembled officers that in his opinion:

'Anybody that gives up his gun to some punk is nothing but a coward. Anybody who does it can kiss his badge goodbye if I can help it. You're policemen, you put your trust in God.' Hettinger's vulnerability in the aftermath of the incident did not fit the military version of masculinity which the L.A.P.D. expected of its officers, and the Captain's choice of words represent the verbal equivalent of General Patton's infamous slapping of a weeping soldier.

By the time that *The Onion Field* was released in 1979, the subject of the emotional well-being of police officers was being openly discussed and the sentiments expressed at that time served to underline the harshness of Hettinger's treatment. As early as 1975, a *Los Angeles Times* article had exposed the dangers to officers who had been involved in traumatic experiences and cited Reiser's pioneering work in recognising 'the need to monitor more closely the emotional health and welfare of their officers.' The same article, after noting a growing tendency for officers to seek retirement on grounds of 'job-induced emotional disability', quoted Dr. Bernard Sosner, a Beverly Hills psychiatrist, on the need for changing attitudes towards emotionally damaged officers: 'Departments have to get

away from the old military-authoritarian relationship between officers and men. Officers have to listen to their men, consider their feelings ... And then the officers have to stand behind their men when attacks come.'¹⁵⁵ In 1980, another article described the problems faced by officers involved in traumatic events which left them with 'what some police psychologists call the post-shooting response and others the stress-trauma syndrome.' The article went on to say that officers can be 'left with emotional problems that can scar a lifetime. Their depression, guilt and self-doubt can cripple them, leaving them with very real physical problems and disrupting their personal lives.' It also noted that 'retirement payments each year to men with emotional disabilities can run to millions.'¹⁵⁶

At the time of Hettinger's death in 1994, L.A.P.D. attitudes had changed to the extent that former Chief Daryl Gates, a man with a reputation for a hard-line approach in most policing matters, felt able to express his opinions of Hettinger's actions in more understanding words: 'He was a great police officer and a great man who pulled himself up out of having been involved in a great tragedy ... I think he always felt guilty because he ran ... I could never understand it. If he had stayed, he'd have been dead.'¹⁵⁷ The current L.A.P.D. Manual also strikes a more balanced tone when discussing an issue which, in 1963, was highly emotive: 'An officer or their partner may be at the mercy of an armed suspect who has the advantage, but experience has shown that the danger to officers is not reduced by them giving up their weapon upon demand. Surrendering their weapon might

¹⁵⁵ William C. Rempel, 'Emotional Problems Taking Police Toll', *Los Angeles Times*, April 25 1975, p. CS1.

¹⁵⁶ Roxane Arnold, 'Police Scars', *Los Angeles Times*, 11 February 1980, p. B1.

¹⁵⁷ Daryl Gates, quoted in Eric Malnic, 'Karl Hettinger; Survived 1963 Onion Field Attack', *Los Angeles Times*, 5 May 1994, p. 30.

mean giving away their only chance for survival; therefore, an officer should use every tactical tool at his disposal to avoid surrendering their weapon.’¹⁵⁸

Despite the L.A.P.D.’s failure to give Hettinger psychological support, he did receive some sympathetic treatment. He served for a time as Chief Parker’s driver, a position which was often linked with promotional prospects and one in which his predecessors had included future-chief Daryl Gates but, finding that a job based at headquarters resulted in constant questioning from fellow-officers over the incident, he requested a return to detective work. While working on the pick-pocket squad, Hettinger, still suffering from a variety of stress-related ailments, became a compulsive thief and, after a number of increasingly blatant thefts from retail stores, was eventually detected and forced to resign from the force in 1966. Despite the prominence of his case, the L.A.P.D. refused to take account of any potential linkage between his traumatic experiences in the line of duty and his recourse to theft. Douglas L. Berger has suggested that Hettinger’s behaviour relates both to the way in which the L.A.P.D. appeared to blame him for Campbell’s death and to the absence of guilt felt by the perpetrators of the crime as they constantly struggled to minimise their punishment. In Berger’s view the apparently unending legal process led Hettinger to take the burden of guilt upon himself and his lapse into petty theft was a convenient way to seek the punishment which would confirm his own assumptions.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ L.A.P.D. Manual, Volume 1, Policy, Section 564. OFFICERS SURRENDERING WEAPON, found at <http://www.lapdonline.org/lapd_manual/volume_1.htm#564> on 12 March 2010.

¹⁵⁹ Douglas L. Berger, ‘The Murder of Moral Idealism: Kant and the Death of Ian Campbell in *The Onion Field*’ in Mark T. Conard (ed.), *The Philosophy of Neo Noir* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), pp. 76-77.

The film certainly leaves its audience in no doubt that the psychological damage inflicted upon Hettinger by his own employers was exacerbated by the long-running saga of Powell and Smith's various trials which left their fate uncertain for many years to come. Although the first criminal trial resulted in the death penalty for both men, they managed to stay alive as a result of their own adroit manipulation of the legal system, of a number of changes in the law and, crucially, by Hettinger's inability to confirm all the details of the shooting.¹⁶⁰ It is undisputed that Powell shot Campbell in the face, but a further four shots, from Campbell's own gun, were fired into his body while Hettinger was running for his life in the darkness. Hettinger consistently testified that it was impossible for him to determine whether those shots were fired by Smith or by Powell, a weakness in the prosecution case which was exploited by both defendants and which was particularly relevant when coupled with post-mortem evidence that the first bullet may not have been fatal. In April 1969, Smith and Powell were granted re-trials as a result of the *ex post facto* application to their case of *Miranda v. Arizona*, a Supreme Court decision which required an arresting officer to advise suspects of their rights to avoid self-incriminating testimony and their rights to legal counsel. In separate trials, Powell's death sentence was re-confirmed but Smith's sentence was reduced to life-imprisonment. Then, in 1970, after the California Supreme Court declared the death penalty unconstitutional, Powell's sentence was also commuted to life-imprisonment.¹⁶¹

By providing a relatively brief, but nonetheless damning, view of the California system of criminal trials, the courtroom scenes in *The Onion Field* placed the film at the

¹⁶⁰ Smith was released in 1982, being re-imprisoned for a string of relatively minor offences before his death in 2007. Powell remains in prison to this date.

¹⁶¹ *Miranda v. Arizona* 384 U.S. 436 (1966).

centre of contemporary discourse on the subject. Hettinger is depicted as enduring a recurring nightmare as, time and time again, he is forced to describe the harrowing events of March 1963. Richard Schickel, writing in *Time*, observed that the film suggested an imbalance in the justice system, which meant that ‘the defense of a criminal’s civil liberties infringes on the rights of victims to a prompt redress and, as in the case of Hettinger, the opportunity to bury his awful memories.’¹⁶² A review in the *Wall Street Journal* noted that Powell and Smith’s relentless exploitation of legal loopholes served to ‘exasperate judges and frustrate lawyers until the trials finally descend into absurdity.’ The article went on to echo Schickel in suggesting that the justice system may have gone too far in protecting the rights of the accused.¹⁶³

In California, criticism of the time required to complete a murder trial had been mounting since the Manson Family trial of 1971, with much of the blame directed at defence lawyers who were attacked for ‘needless time-consuming legal manoeuvres in and out of the courtroom.’¹⁶⁴ In 1977, State Attorney-General Evelle J. Younger had failed to secure the support of the California legislature for an initiative to guarantee speedier trials, despite having presented a copy of Wambaugh’s book to each assembly member.¹⁶⁵ In January 1980, Younger wrote an article welcoming a proposed one-year test of televised trials in which he cited the film as providing ‘an example of the morass’ which he saw in the legal system. He also quoted one of the prosecutors in the Onion Field case: ‘The

¹⁶² Richard Schickel, ‘Cinema: Policeman’s Lot’, *Time*, vol. 114, no. 14, 1 October 1979, p. 58.

¹⁶³ Joy Gould Boyum, ‘Wambaugh’s Ironic Tale of Crime and Punishment’, *Wall Street Journal*, 28 September 1979, p. 19.

¹⁶⁴ ‘Tate Case Accents Court Morass’, *Los Angeles Times*, 24 January 1971, p. E6.

¹⁶⁵ Kenneth Reich, ‘Speedier Trials Sought: Younger Hits Attorneys on Reform’, *Los Angeles Times*, 29 November 1977, p. D9. Much of Hettinger’s ordeal stemmed from California’s bifurcation of murder trials, with separate hearings required to deal first with guilt and subsequently with sentencing.

American system of justice is a laughing-stock ... and completely incomprehensible to the rest of the world.'¹⁶⁶ Despite these criticisms, a further attempt to accelerate the trial process failed in 1984 and reform would not finally be achieved until the adoption of the Crime Victims' Justice Reform Act in 1992, which promoted speedy trials by reducing the number of times crime victims were required to testify and mandating reciprocal discovery of evidence, whilst also increasing sentences for a variety of crimes.¹⁶⁷

After leaving the L.A.P.D., Karl Hettinger managed to live a useful and productive life and to sustain his marriage. Employment as a contract gardener led to a supervisory position at a commercial nursery and, in later life, he entered local politics and served as County Supervisor for several years. However, his apparent return to normality concealed a continuing addiction to alcohol and in 1994 he died from liver disease at the age of fifty-nine. The portrayal of Hettinger's vulnerable masculinity in *The Onion Field* was the first serious screen representation of an L.A.P.D. detective who had been psychologically undermined by job-related trauma, a sympathetic portrayal which would have been impossible at the time of the incident. Although the psychopathic violence of Greg Powell is shown to be the primary cause of Hettinger's downfall as a police officer, the film leaves its audience in no doubt that his inability to deal with the aftermath of his traumatic experience stems from the insensitivity of the L.A.P.D. command-structure and the tortuous nature of the California justice system.

¹⁶⁶ Evelle J. Younger, 'Best Agent for Courtroom Reform: Televised Trials', *Los Angeles Times*, 6 January 1980, p. G5.

¹⁶⁷ *State of California Crime Victims' Handbook* found at <<http://www.ag.ca.gov/publications/victimshandbk/cvhfore.htm>> on 12 March 2010.

IV. C.R.A.S.H., Hammer

1. Introduction

We will no longer let them use their clubs on us in dark corners. We are going to make them do it in the glaring light of television.

Martin Luther King, speaking in Selma, Alabama, 1965.¹

The feature films of the 1970s had broken new ground by illustrating the uneasy and frequently hostile relationship between the L.A.P.D. and the minority communities of Los Angeles but, for much of the 1980s, this perpetually thorny area was largely ignored, despite the presence of fictional L.A.P.D. officers in several major Hollywood productions. John Badham's *Blue Thunder* (1983) underlined the L.A.P.D.'s commitment to helicopters and its fondness for intelligence-gathering in a film which co-starred Roy Scheider and a helicopter with an impressive range of armaments and surveillance capabilities. *Lethal Weapon*, a highly successful comedy-drama, based its story around the relationship between a black and a white detective but, nevertheless, managed to ignore the tensions between the police and minority communities which remained at the heart of policing in Los Angeles. Although John McTiernan's *Die Hard* (1988) portrayed the L.A.P.D. as 'macho assholes', infatuated with technology and much too eager to employ armed force, the context for this critique was a battle with international criminals inside a futuristic skyscraper, rather than a conflict with minority groups on the streets of Los Angeles. However, between 1988 and 1991, Los Angeles was the scene of two real-life events which re-emphasised the hostility between a still predominantly white police force and the people of colour who populated the inner city. In 1988, Operation Hammer, a major police initiative aimed against street gangs, led to the arrest of thousands of young men while, in 1991, an apparently routine traffic stop resulted in the beating of Rodney King, a pivotal

¹ Martin Luther King, cited in Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, p. 252.

event in the history of policing the city. Coincidentally, at the moment that each of these controversies, respectively, came to dominate public discourse in Los Angeles, a film was released which engaged directly with the same issue. Dennis Hopper's *Colors*, which deals with the challenges involved in policing black and Latino gangs, was released a few days after the launch of Operation Hammer, while the première of John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood* coincided with the publication of an eagerly-awaited report from the independent commission charged with investigating the L.A.P.D. as a result of the King incident.

Chief Daryl Gates (1978-1992)

At the beginning of 1991, Gates' position as Chief of the L.A.P.D. seemed to be as unassailable as that of the force which he commanded. Even the Watts riot, one of the most damaging civil disturbances in American history, had failed to generate any significant change in either the operational management or the governance of the L.A.P.D. and, although Chief Parker had died in 1966, his successors and protégés had ensured that the fundamental tenets of his approach to policing had endured. After a long and successful career, which had begun in 1949, Gates had commanded the L.A.P.D. for almost thirteen years, a period of office second only to that of his famous mentor. Although he had been praised for his achievements, including the success of the security operations surrounding the 1984 Olympic Games and innovative programmes such as Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.), he was no stranger to controversy and had frequently been forced to defend himself and his force against complaints of racism, disregard for civil liberties and excessive use of force. Despite such criticism, and despite the approach of his sixty-fifth birthday, Gates had no reason to fear for his future employment: with tenure equivalent to

that of a Federal Judge, the Chief of the L.A.P.D. had a job for life. Thus, secure in his position, Gates had emulated his predecessors by consistently shrugging off his critics, while continuing to pronounce his pride in leading ‘the best police force in the world.’ Like previous Chiefs, he could be confident of the backing of white home-owners, while Latinos were also generally supportive of the police, especially in the long-established Mexican American areas of East Los Angeles.

Nevertheless, there were several indications that not all was well. Civil suits against the police for excessive force had risen dramatically: the city had paid settlements of six million dollars in 1989, eleven million in 1990 and would pay over fourteen million in 1991.² Relationships with African Americans were often challenging and, throughout his term as Chief, the outspoken Gates had found himself embroiled in several high-profile, racially sensitive incidents, some of which had forced him to accept the need for changes to the L.A.P.D.’s rules of engagement. In 1979, the death of housewife Euelia Love on her own doorstep, from twelve bullets fired by two officers, had led to a revision in shooting policy while, in 1982, the death in custody of James Mincey had resulted in the prohibition of the chokehold.³ Then, in August 1988, ‘nearly eighty’ L.A.P.D. officers, ‘armed with guns sledgehammers and crowbars’ raided what was assumed to be a crack-house in Dalton Avenue, a residential street in South Central. The results included the arrest and alleged intimidation of thirty people and the virtual destruction of the property, all in pursuit of a non-existent drugs haul. In the following year, although three indicted officers were cleared of criminal charges, the City of Los Angeles paid the residents three million dollars in an

² Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 334.

³ For a more detailed account of the Eulia Love case and its consequences, see Chapter V Bad Cops, 4, *Dark Blue*, p. 306.

out-of-court settlement.⁴ Gates was increasingly demonised by the black community but encountered little overt criticism from Los Angeles' leading African American citizen. From 1986 to 1990, Mayor Tom Bradley consistently gave the Chief 'outstanding' ratings in his annual assessment.⁵

Operation Hammer

Despite the excesses of Dalton Avenue, the high-water mark for aggressive, paramilitary-style policing in Los Angeles had been set four months earlier by Operation Hammer, a series of gang sweeps involving a mass police presence and thousands of arrests. Hammer was Gates' response to the increasing level of violent behaviour by black street gangs, a phenomenon which had increased dramatically in the mid-1980s as crack cocaine became the drug of choice for impoverished African Americans and a huge source of revenue for gang members. In April 1988, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that 'an unprecedented strike-force of 1,000 police officers hit the streets ... in a full-scale assault on the city's violent youth gangs.' This deliberate show of strength, which included the anti-gang specialists from C.R.A.S.H. units as well as Metro's elite tactical squads, produced a huge amount of publicity and a significant number of arrests. Gates heralded the initiative as part of a 'struggle to obliterate the gangs of Los Angeles. We're going to wage a war on gangs and we're going to continue until it's finished.'⁶ Hammer would become one of the defining periods of his fourteen-year tenure as Chief and, in his autobiography, he praised

⁴ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, pp. 350-52.

⁵ Ibid, p. 357.

⁶ Eric Malnic and Mark Arax, '1000 Officers Stage Assault Against Violent Youth Gangs, *Los Angeles Times*, 9 April, 1988, Metro Desk, pp.1-2.

its initial effects: ‘We made hundreds of arrests. We drove drug dealers underground. We completely disrupted gang activity. And in 1988 we had one of the lowest homicide tallies [sic] in twenty years: 735, down from 812 the year before and down from 1,080 in 1980.’⁷ Mike Davis has emphasised the para-military nature of the initiative by describing Hammer as ‘a Vietnam-era search-and-destroy mission ... Chief Gates saturates the streets with his “Blue Machine”, jacking up thousands of local teenagers at random’. Davis has estimated that, by 1990, although Hammer had led to more than fifty thousand arrests, ninety percent of suspects had been released without charge.⁸ The indiscriminate nature of the police action is also confirmed by a study conducted by U.S.C., which indicated that only twenty-five percent of those arrested had genuine gang affiliations.⁹ Despite the questionable nature of many of these arrests, the concern over gang-violence was such that, at least initially, many African American community leaders backed Gates’ controversial tactics as a lesser evil than the tyranny of the Crips or the Bloods.¹⁰ Mayor Bradley’s support of the police tactics was made evident in comments made to the *Los Angeles Sentinel*: ‘I’m proud of the way that they have performed. They are determined ... to take back the streets of Los Angeles from these hoodlums’.¹¹

The Rodney King Beating and the Christopher Commission

However secure Gates’ position may have seemed, in the early hours of 3 March 1991, a confrontation between a group of his officers and an aberrant African American

⁷ Gates and Shah, *Chief*, p. 339

⁸ Davis, *City of Quartz*, pp. 268, 277.

⁹ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, pp. 320-21.

¹⁰ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, p. 17.

¹¹ ‘The Night Of A Thousand Cops’, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 14 April 1988, p. A1.

motorist marked the beginning of a remarkable series of events which, in less than two years, would force him from office and, over the course of the decade, would cause the L.A.P.D. to be vilified and demoralised and to lose its long-cherished political independence. In the early hours of that day, as Tim and Melanie Singer, a husband-and-wife team of C.H.P. officers, were patrolling the 210 Freeway, they gave chase to a white Hyundai travelling at excessive speed. When the Singers called for back-up, no other C.H.P. patrol cars were in the vicinity, but several L.A.P.D. units were able to respond. The Hyundai eventually left the freeway, coming to a halt in a residential area, where Tim Singer ordered the three occupants, all of whom were African American men, to leave the car and to assume a prone position. The passengers, Bryant Allen and Freddie Helms, did as instructed but the driver, Rodney King, remained in the vehicle. As Melanie Singer approached with her firearm drawn and ordered King to get out, she was joined by three L.A.P.D. patrol cars, containing Sergeant Stacey Koon and Officers Powell, Wind, Briseno and Solano, and by an L.A.P.D. helicopter which illuminated the scene with its searchlight. King eventually left the vehicle and, after various gesticulations, joined his companions on the ground. At that stage the L.A.P.D. officers took over the arrest but, as they approached King to restrain him, he rose to his feet and moved towards them. Within the next few minutes he was subdued and handcuffed but, in the process, he suffered over fifty blows from police batons, two shocks from an electric stun-gun and several kicks. His injuries included a broken leg, nine skull fractures, a broken cheek bone and a shattered eye socket.¹²

¹² Houston A. Baker, 'Scene ... Not Heard' in Robin Gooding-Williams (ed.), *Reading Rodney King: Reading Urban Uprising*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 42.

Even in Los Angeles, where reports of excessive use of force by L.A.P.D. officers towards minority males were relatively commonplace, the severity of King's injuries would have guaranteed a reasonable amount of public scrutiny. However, on this occasion, a potentially serious local incident was transformed into an international media sensation by the accidental presence of a domestic video-camera. George Holliday, a resident of a nearby apartment block, took advantage of the illumination provided by the helicopter spotlight to capture the beating on a video-tape which, within forty-eight hours, would be shown repeatedly on television stations across the world, causing outrage wherever it was broadcast. From the Fifties onwards, television programmes such as *Dragnet* and *Adam-12* had provided a steady diet of positive images of the L.A.P.D. to both local and national audiences. Now, ironically, it was the 'glaring light' of television news which ensured that the L.A.P.D.'s most infamous incident was on display in homes throughout America and that, within Los Angeles, civil discourse was dominated by the conduct of its police force. Among widespread condemnation of the L.A.P.D. as brutal and racist, a poll published in the *Los Angeles Times*, a newspaper with a predominantly white readership, indicated that ninety-two percent of its readers were convinced that the officers had used excessive force.¹³ The officers involved were immediately suspended and within weeks were charged with a variety of criminal offences, while the City Council began their own investigation by appointing Warren Christopher to chair The Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department (henceforth the Christopher Commission).

Christopher was a prominent Los Angeles attorney who had held positions in two Democratic presidential administrations and, in 1965, had served as vice-chairman of the

¹³ Ted Rodrich and Susan Pinkus, 'Majority Say Police Brutality Is Common', *Los Angeles Times*, 10 March 1991, p. A1.

McCone Commission, the body established to review the causes of the Watts Riot. Its report, of which Christopher had been the principal author, had identified many problems in the relationship between the L.A.P.D. and the African American community but had led to little change. According to Lou Cannon, the report had been condemned by local liberals as too soft on Chief Parker and by an advisory committee to the Civil Rights Commission as ‘elemental, superficial, unoriginal and unimaginative.’¹⁴ Twenty-five years later, the public outrage which followed the King beating presented Christopher with a second opportunity to critique the L.A.P.D. Describing the incident itself as ‘a landmark in the recent history of law enforcement’ and ‘comparable to the Scottsboro case in 1931 and the Serpico case in 1967’, his report provided a devastating indictment, citing a management failure to control officers who were guilty of repeated misuse of force, an organisational culture which isolated police from communities and overwhelming evidence of racism and bias.¹⁵ These findings completely undermined the position of Chief Gates who had claimed that, although the King beating was clearly excessive, in his opinion it was an ‘aberration’ which did not accurately reflect the way that the L.A.P.D. behaved.¹⁶ The Christopher Commission also made recommendations for future police governance, including the removal of the civil service protection which the Chief of Police had enjoyed since 1937 and a restriction of tenure to a maximum of two five-year terms. In April, Gates had successfully fought off an attempt to suspend him by the Police Commission but was now,

¹⁴ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, p. 122.

¹⁵ *Report of The Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department*, p. i. The ‘Scottsboro Boys’, a group of young African Americans, had been charged with the alleged rape of two white prostitutes. Originally sentenced to death by an Alabama Court, their sentences were commuted after the Supreme Court ruled that they had been denied proper representation. Detective Frank Serpico exposed widespread corruption in the New York Police Department, a story dramatised in Sydney Lumet’s *Serpico*.

¹⁶ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, p. 46.

once again, urged to step down and, after feverish media speculation and a significant amount of political manoeuvring, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, on 13 July 1991, that he had agreed to resign by the end of the year.¹⁷ This report turned out to be premature and the embattled Chief subsequently decided that he would stay in office until the Commission's main recommendations were placed before the Los Angeles electorate.

Demographic and economic change

During his years of service, Gates had seen Los Angeles experience significant social, economic and political change. By 1990, massive flows of immigration had transformed a city which was once predominantly white into a multi-racial metropolis, in which Latinos represented forty percent of the population, with whites at thirty-seven percent, African Americans at fourteen percent and Asians at ten percent.¹⁸ Once a post-war powerhouse of manufacturing industry, Los Angeles had become what Roger Keil has described as a post-Fordist, international economy which, during the Eighties, had lost more than half of its manufacturing jobs.¹⁹ Traditional industries which, for many years, had provided inner-city areas with highly paid, blue-collar employment were rapidly closing, while the service industries which replaced them paid relatively low wages and were increasingly distributed around the greater metropolitan area, leaving the inner city as a post-industrial wasteland.²⁰ South Central Los Angeles had been especially hard hit by

¹⁷ Bill Boyarsky, 'How Deal With Gates Was Struck', *Los Angeles Times*, 13 July 1991, p. 1.

¹⁸ *City of Los Angeles Census 2000*.

¹⁹ Keil, *Los Angeles*, p. 175. See also the works of Allen J. Scott and Edward Soja, Mike Davis, Liam Kennedy and David E. James referenced throughout this thesis.

²⁰ Davis, *City of Quartz*, pp. 304-5.

these economic developments and by the effects of Proposition 13, a measure adopted by California in 1978 which reflected the electoral power of white home-owners by mandating a sharp fall in real-estate taxes and resulted in dramatically reduced state funding for all inner-city social and educational programmes. In the subsequent era of ‘Reaganomics’, federal social programmes were also cut and, by 1990, more than fifty percent of African American and Latino men living in South Central were unemployed.²¹ These negative developments in the legitimate economy coincided with a rapidly growing stream of illicit revenue from crack cocaine, thus creating ideal circumstances for young men to join gangs.²²

The L.A.P.D. was not immune to these far-reaching demographic and economic forces, although its rate of change was much slower than that of the city which it served. In 1978, Gates had inherited a force which was dominated by white male officers and, despite a declared aim of increasing the numbers of minorities and women within its ranks, little progress was made until 1980. In that year, a combination of legal and political pressure forced the Chief to accept two Consent Decrees, one which mandated a target of twenty percent female officers and another which required the employment of numbers of African American and Hispanic officers equivalent to their respective shares of the population of the city. These targets were not fully achieved but, on 18 February 1988, while reporting the appointment of Bernard Parks as the second-ever African American to serve as Deputy Chief, the *Los Angeles Times* claimed that black officers comprised almost twelve percent of the L.A.P.D.²³ By 1990, that number had risen to thirteen percent, while Latinos

²¹ Keil, *Los Angeles*, p. 218.

²² Davis, *City of Quartz*, pp. 309-10.

²³ David Freed, ‘Black Deputy Chief Named; Second in LAPD’s History’, *Los Angeles Times*, 18 February 1988, p. 3.

accounted for twenty-one percent and women for twelve percent. However, even after this obvious progress, more than sixty percent of the force was still white, a number which rose above eighty percent in the higher ranks and in the elite squads which had been the traditional avenues to promotion, especially Metro, S.W.A.T., Air Support and Internal Affairs.²⁴

Despite continuing growth in the city's population, the impact of Proposition 13 forced the L.A.P.D. to restrict its expenditure. As Gerald Woods has pointed out, since the tax changes included in that measure reduced municipal revenues by at least forty percent and since policing typically accounted for approximately one third of the city's budget, it was inevitable that funding would be reduced.²⁵ Joe Domanick has criticised Gates' response to this fiscal pressure, arguing that, when faced with a rapidly growing and changing city and real reductions in funding, the Chief refused to consider a fundamental reorganisation and insisted on retaining the existing structure of the L.A.P.D., effectively choosing to meet his financial targets by allowing attrition to reduce the number of officers on the street.²⁶

Developments in Cinema

For the American film industry, the 1980s was a decade of significant change, in its commercial structure, its means of display and the nature of its artistic output. The newly available synergies between movies, consumer electronics and other broadcast media led to the absorption of several major studios within larger corporations: in 1985, News Corp

²⁴ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 292.

²⁵ Woods, *The Police in Los Angeles*, p. 260.

²⁶ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 288.

purchased Fox and, in 1989, Sony bought both Columbia and Tri-Star, while Matsushita acquired MCA-Universal. New technology triggered major changes in the economics of movie-making, with the film itself increasingly regarded as a ‘detonating point’ for future sales of electronic games, merchandise, theme park rides and, especially, of video-tapes. Ownership of video-recorders rose dramatically, from under two million in 1980 to more than sixty-two million in 1989 and, in that same year, sales of films on video-tape generated eleven billion dollars in sales, while box-office receipts for the same period amounted to only five billion. In movie theatres, the advent of the multiplex increased the number of available screens by approximately fifty percent, allowing major releases to achieve saturation coverage on more than one thousand screens.²⁷ While advertising budgets soared and became almost as significant as production costs, the traditional links between commercial success and artistic recognition collapsed as the percentage of Oscars awarded to the top twenty-five gross-earning films declined dramatically.²⁸

In this new trading environment, more than half of Hollywood’s output took the form of ‘blockbusters’, many of which were fantasies such as *Star Wars: Episode V-The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Episode VI-Return Of The Jedi* (1983), and Steven Spielberg’s *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and his initial Indiana Jones trilogy. However, the decade also saw a large number of action movies featuring muscular white heroes. Sylvester Stallone, who had come to fame in the Seventies through his role as Rocky Balboa, continued the *Rocky* franchise through the Eighties and, in *First Blood*

²⁷ Stephen Prince, *Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow* (New York: Charles Scribners’ Sons, 2000), pp. 96-97.

²⁸ Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), pp. 341-2. In the Eighties, Sydney Levinson’s *Rain Man* (1988) was the only movie to earn a Best Picture Oscar and to feature in that same year’s top twenty-five earners.

(1982) and its several sequels, created another mono-syllabic fighting man in the character of John Rambo. Arnold Schwarzenegger flexed his muscles in ten movies, beginning with *Conan The Barbarian* (1982). Both Susan Jeffords and Robert Sklar have characterised Hollywood's obsession with the male body in this decade as a response to the challenge of representing white masculinity at a time when the lingering effects of military defeat in Vietnam, coupled with the advances made by women, ethnic minorities and gays, had undermined heterosexual male self-confidence.²⁹ Although Clint Eastwood reasserted his position as the dominant cinematic policeman of the Reagan era by reprising his role as 'Dirty Harry' in his own *Sudden Impact* (1983) and Buddy Van Horn's *The Dead Pool* (1988), representations of police officers were not immune to prevailing cinematic trends and both *Lethal Weapon* and *Die Hard* used the white male body as a central feature of their Los Angeles-based dramas.

If muscular white masculinity was a dominant presence in the cinema, another branch of popular culture was increasingly influenced by African American men, through the increasing popularity of hip-hop, a mixture of musical styles of which rap was the most commercially exploitable expression. From its origins in New York City, the influence of hip-hop spread quickly and, by the early Eighties, new forms of rap were constantly emerging. Gangsta rap, which originated in Los Angeles, became notorious for the explicit and controversial nature of its lyrics but proved to be irresistible to those film-makers intent on portraying life in America's inner cities. Although its extensive use in movie soundtracks is most heavily associated with black directors, its breakthrough came in a film directed by a white man who had first come to fame as a filmic icon of Sixties counter-

²⁹ Susan Jeffords, 'Can Masculinity Be Terminated?', in Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (eds.), *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 246-47, and Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, p. 345.

culture. In 1988, Dennis Hopper's *Colors* became the first Hollywood production to feature gangsta rap on its soundtrack and, by writing and performing the title song, Los Angeles-based rapper Ice-T cemented his reputation as the genre's leading innovator. Spike Lee subsequently used Public Enemy's 'Fight The Power' as the defining musical theme of his highly-successful *Do The Right Thing*, an Oscar-nominated movie which stimulated a renewed burst of black film-making.³⁰ In the following three years, African American directors released more than thirty films, most of which dealt with life on the streets of America's inner cities and, almost invariably, included gangsta rap in their sound-tracks.

This musical phenomenon has subsequently attracted a significant degree of academic attention, with a variety of scholars ascribing its origins to the economic, political and cultural factors prevailing in Eighties Los Angeles. Eithne Quinn points to its emergence within the context of 'global and post-Fordist restructuring and neoconservative social policy', arguing that it 'voiced the experiences and desires of an oppressed community in a period of economic transformation.'³¹ Robin Kelley acknowledges the uneven pattern of de-industrialisation of Los Angeles and the consequent 'spatial restructuring', which was highly detrimental to inner city areas such as South Central and Watts, but also argues that gangsta rap was 'born amidst the militarisation of ... black communities since ... the early 1980s, when Los Angeles became a primary site of the so-called war on drugs' and that 'police repression' was its primary target. Kelley sees gangsta rap as 'a window into, and critique of, the criminalisation of black youth' and describes

³⁰ Public Enemy, 'Fight The Power', *Do The Right Thing* (Columbia Records, 1988).

³¹ Eithne Quinn, *Nothing but a 'g' thang: The Culture and Commerce of gangsta rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 11, 13.

rappers as ‘underground street reporters.’³² Imani Perry follows a similar theme in arguing that, as an expression of ‘outlaw consciousness’ involving a ‘critique of middle-class white ethics, economic inequalities and legal disparities’, gangsta rap ‘appeals to many young black audiences with counter-hegemonic ideals.’³³

The close association between gangsta rap and Hollywood has been characterised by Mike Davis as evidence of commercial opportunism on the part of the ‘hegemonic media’ through the ‘assimilation and repackaging’ of a ‘contemporary cultural practice’. In Davis’ opinion, the evidence suggests that ‘Hollywood is eager to mine Los Angeles’ barrios and ghettos for every last lurid image of self-destruction and community holocaust.’³⁴ Craig Watkins takes a more balanced viewpoint, arguing that, during this period, gangsta rappers and the still predominantly white movie studios developed a mutually beneficial commercial relationship, with rap artists becoming increasingly involved in the production process, initially through the music but subsequently as featured actors. Both parties benefited from sales of soundtrack albums and while the increased exposure from feature films ensured that rappers gained a broader audience, their presence in movies served to increase cinema attendances of both young blacks and young whites who had become attracted by rap music.³⁵ The potential synergy between musical and cinematic success became increasingly obvious after Ice-T appeared in a leading role as a

³² Robin D. G. Kelley, ‘kickin’ reality, kickin’ ballistics: gangsta rap and post-industrial los angeles’ in William E. Perkins (ed.), *Droppin’ Science: critical essays on rap music and hip hop culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), pp. 118, 131.

³³ Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 116.

³⁴ Davis, *City of Quartz*, pp. 86-7.

³⁵ Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Black Working Class* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 187, 196.

police officer in Mario Van Peebles' *New Jack City* (1991), a film for which he also wrote and performed the title track.

In this chapter I discuss two films, each of which allows exploration of the interactions between contemporary concerns, cinematic representation and historical reality, while also providing insights into the racial and spatial politics of Los Angeles. *Colors* was the first Hollywood production to give extensive coverage to the street gangs of Los Angeles, albeit from the perspective of white police officers. *Boyz N the Hood*, a coming-of-age story set in South Central Los Angeles, took its star, its title and much of its dialogue from gangsta rap and offered a prescient warning of the tensions between the L.A.P.D. and the black community. Each film engaged directly with contemporary issues surrounding gangs, drugs and methods of policing and each was accused of encouraging violence, even before becoming available for public viewing. Through serendipity, each film also found itself, at least temporarily, to be at the centre of contemporary discourses of law enforcement.

2. *Colors* (1988)

We are the gang capital of the United States in terms of the numbers, in terms of violence, in terms of its overall impact on the criminal justice system.

Ira Reiner, Los Angeles District Attorney, November 1987.³⁶

I am a nightmare walking, psychopath talking
 King of my jungle just a gangster stalking
 Living life like a firecracker quick is my fuse
 Then dead as a deathpack the colors I choose
 Red or Blue, Cuz or Blood, it just don't matter
 Sucker die for your life when my shotgun scatters
 We gangs of L.A. will never die - just multiply

Ice-T, 'Colors'.³⁷

The release of *Colors* in April 1988 provoked a remarkable convergence of interest between a feature film and a real-life drama which was in progress on the streets of Los Angeles. When director Dennis Hopper began filming in 1987, he could certainly have anticipated that his story of white police officers battling African American and Latino gang-members across the inner-city areas of Los Angeles would be controversial. However, he could not have foreseen that its first screening would coincide with Operation Hammer, the largest anti-gang initiative in the history of the L.A.P.D., and that his movie would be greeted with overwhelming amounts of public protests, commentary and criticism. Although gang-violence had plagued the inner city for several years, the upsurge in police activity and in public concern which surrounded the release of *Colors* had an unlikely catalyst: the violent death of a young, Japanese American graphic artist on the streets of an affluent Westside community.³⁸

³⁶ Paul Feldman, 'Millions Spent; Hundreds Jailed', *Los Angeles Times*, 12 November 1987, p. 1.

³⁷ Ice-T, 'Colors', *Colors* (Sire/Warner Bros. Records, 1988).

³⁸ 'Westside' commonly denotes a group of wealthy communities within Los Angeles, located west of Downtown and north of the Santa Monica Freeway and including Beverly Hills, Brentwood and Westwood.

Gang violence, in one form or another, had a long history in Los Angeles and, by the mid-1980s, the deteriorating economic conditions of the inner city, coupled with the emergence of crack cocaine, had reinforced the appeal of gangs to Latinos and, especially, to African Americans. Homicide rates increased alarmingly and, in 1987, almost four hundred Angelenos died from gang-violence, with a preponderance of victims being young African American and Latino men, most of whom had gang connections. Almost invariably, these deaths occurred in one of the inner city districts where gang culture was most strongly established: the Latino *barrios* of East Los Angeles or the African American districts of South Central Los Angeles and Watts.³⁹ Most public concern over this rising death toll was limited to these minority communities and, although law enforcement agencies devoted substantial resources to combating gang activity, the majority of white Angelenos were largely unaffected. Then, on 21 January 1988, as Karen Toshima joined the crowds of people who were enjoying the shops, bars, restaurants and cinemas of Westwood Village, her innocent progress led her into crossfire between two African American gangs and she was killed by a shot to the head.

This gang-related killing, in an area which was a popular playground for wealthy young whites, resulted in a public outcry and a significant increase in political pressure from local merchants and business interests, the immediate consequence of which was a tripling of police patrols in Westwood. This action was quickly followed by a bitter response from black and Latino leaders, who contrasted the uproar over the Toshima shooting with the perceived indifference to the routine violence in the inner city. *Time* quoted State Assemblywoman Maxine Waters: ‘There is a deep feeling in the community that the philosophy of the police department is to “let them kill each other” in South Central

³⁹ Boyer, *et al*, eds., *The Enduring Vision*, p. 945.

L.A. The black community has known for years that a problem is not a problem until it hits the white community.’⁴⁰ In the ensuing political wrangling over the methods used to allocate police resources between affluent areas and the depressed inner city, the L.A.P.D. gained budgetary approval for an additional one hundred and fifty uniformed officers and for substantial amounts of police overtime payments, additional funding which was used to launch Operation Hammer, a series of gang sweeps on an unprecedented scale.

Thus, Karen Toshima’s death in Westwood had catapulted the issue of gang-violence to the centre of media exposure, political debate and police action. By the time that *Colors* was released, gangs were widely perceived as the greatest challenge to public safety in Los Angeles and Operation Hammer was at its peak. Through its focus on the approach taken by the L.A.P.D. to tackling gang violence, *Colors* engaged directly with the issue which was dominating discourses of law enforcement in Los Angeles. Even allowing for these exceptional circumstances, Hopper’s film generated a remarkable volume of critical commentary and correspondence. The *Los Angeles Times* ran seven major articles directly related to the film and, in addition to its normal correspondents, invited guest contributions from African American and Latino commentators. The 16 April edition of *La Opinión* included three separate articles dealing with the movie and the public concern which it had aroused. However, the position of *Colors* at the eye of this storm is exemplified by the editorial page of Southern California’s most prominent African American newspaper, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*. In an edition published six days after the film’s première, the editorial column, under the headline ‘Be Careful Out There’, welcomed the fact that, since the Toshima killing, the police were at last taking the problem

⁴⁰ Elaine Lafferty and Margaret B. Carlson, ‘The Price of Life in Los Angeles’, *Time*, vol. 131, issue 8, 22 February 1988, p. 31.

of gang-violence seriously, but noted that less than one hundred charges had arisen from more than one thousand arrests, raising the possibility that people were being ‘rousted just because they are black’. On the same page, a cartoon captured some of the community’s concerns over police actions by showing an L.A.P.D. baton coming down on the head of a young black man, with a caption reading: ‘War on Street Hoodlums: First You Have To Get His Attention’. An additional article, ‘Making Of A Hoodlum’, discussed the various social factors which, in combination, were likely to propel young men into gang membership. Alan Bell, the *Sentinel*’s film critic, contributed a piece entitled ‘*Colors* Colors Perception Of The Black Community’, in which he denigrated the movie for failing to provide any context for gang violence and for glamourising gangs whilst simultaneously portraying the black community as a whole ‘in a poor light’. Finally, a second cartoon showed a black protestor carrying a placard reading ‘BAN THE MOVIE COLORS’, while the object of his attention, a middle-aged white man in a suit, carried a bag of dollars towards the bank.⁴¹

Eleven years after *The Choirboys*, *Colors* marked the return of uniformed L.A.P.D. officers to leading roles in a major film but, unlike Wambaugh’s patrolmen, these officers worked within one of the specialised anti-gang units which the L.A.P.D. had introduced in the mid-1970s. Their original title of Total Resources Against Street Hoodlums (T.R.A.S.H.) had been abandoned, for understandable public relations reasons, and the new teams were re-branded as Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (C.R.A.S.H.), thus replacing an acronym which resonates with contempt with an alternative which

⁴¹ *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 21 April 1988, p. A4.

resonates with aggression.⁴² *Colors* announces its claims to authenticity by opening with a documentary-style on-screen graphic, contrasting the relatively small number of officers serving in these dedicated anti-gang units with the large number of gang members. Hopper cites a total of six hundred gangs and seventy thousand gang members in greater Los Angeles, against which the combined forces of the L.A.P.D. and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (L.A.S.D.) amounted to only two hundred and fifty specialist officers in the field. While broadly correct, the director's use of these numbers can also be seen as dramatic licence, since the specialised units had access to the full resources of both major law-enforcement agencies, which jointly comprised more than eighteen thousand officers, in addition to several thousand officers serving in the forces of independent local cities, such as Long Beach and Torrance. Estimating the number of gang members on the streets of Los Angeles is, in itself, an inexact science which has been the subject of heated debate, often influenced by local politics. In his autobiography, Daryl Gates cites four hundred and seventy-four gangs in the City of Los Angeles with a membership of thirty-five thousand, evenly split between African Americans and Latinos.⁴³ Mike Davis quotes a range of membership estimates from ten thousand to fifty thousand, a reflection of the difficulty in delineating hard-core gang members from those with only vaguely defined affiliations.⁴⁴ Despite the divergence in the estimates, Hopper's opening graphics successfully make the point that the dedicated anti-gang officers on the street appeared to have a task which, quantitatively at least, was hopeless.

⁴² Gates and Shah, *Chief*, p. 337. The L.A.S.D., which is also featured in the film, gave its own anti-gang unit the relatively innocuous title of Operation Safe Streets (O.S.S.).

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 337.

⁴⁴ Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 270.

Although *Colors* was the first Hollywood movie to devote significant screen-time to Los Angeles' street gangs, these groups were long-established in the city, especially the Latino gangs which had originated in the Thirties. As Diego Vigil has argued, in the isolated and marginalised *barrios* of East Los Angeles, conditions of overcrowding, unemployment and lack of residential mobility, coupled with a social life centred upon the streets, made it easy for a gang sub-culture to thrive.⁴⁵ Susan Phillips, in a study dealing primarily with the later decades of the twentieth century, identifies the additional influence of a high rate of incarceration, noting that imprisonment worked to cement relationships between young men. Phillips characterises Latino gang-culture as 'a form of empowerment and protection, a net that people have woven to stop themselves from falling any lower.' She describes the gangs as 'bounded and historic entities, tied by blood and war to the neighbourhoods they inhabit' and notes their tendency to seek 'opportunities to make their names through violent action.'⁴⁶

In *Colors*, the Twenty-First Street gang is represented in a way which is consistent with Phillips' analysis. They are a tightly knit group in a narrowly-defined geographical area, with an overwhelming sense of loyalty to their *barrio*. For these young men, who see little prospect of advancement through education and regular employment, the gang operates as an area support network and the film shows how the powerful influences of loyalty and kinship can draw them into gang-culture. At the beginning of the movie the gang-leader, Frog (Trinidad Silva), works hard to prevent the police from classifying his younger brother Felipe as a gang member and wants to keep him off the streets and into

⁴⁵ Diego Vigil, 'Community Dynamics and the Rise of Street Gangs' in Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco and Mariela M. Pérez, eds., *Latinos: Remaking America* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 97-101.

⁴⁶ Susan A. Phillips, *Wallbanger': Graffiti and Gangs in L.A.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 65-84.

education. By its end, an attack on the *barrio* by a rival gang enrages both brothers, persuading Frog to allow Felipe to graduate as a gangster, a process which requires him to suffer a brutal beating as an initiation rite.

Although Latino gangs had become an integral part of *barrio* life, by the late 1980s their profile within the local media had been all but eclipsed by the rise of African American street gangs. The Crips and their deadly rivals, the Bloods, were engaged in an increasingly murderous conflict, fuelled by the huge revenues available from crack cocaine.⁴⁷ The long-standing rivalry between these factions underpins much of the storyline of *Colors* and the title itself is a reference to their signature colours: blue for the Crips and, naturally, red for the Bloods. Joe Domanick estimates that, by the mid-1980s, while Latino gang members dominated Los Angeles County, African Americans constituted the majority of gang members within the City of Los Angeles.⁴⁸ Although *Colors* includes a shooting war between a Latino gang and a group of Crips, in reality, clashes of this nature were extremely rare and gang violence, almost invariably, comprised Latino fighting Latino or Crips fighting Bloods.⁴⁹ At the end of the 1980s, the risk of inter-ethnic conflict remained relatively small as a result of the difference in the gangs' respective drug interests: crack cocaine was largely an African American concern, while Latino gangs were generally involved in the sale of more conventional drugs.⁵⁰ *Colors* follows this demarcation fairly closely: within its narrative, crack dealing is confined to African Americans while Latino drug-use is restricted to marijuana, amphetamines and PCP.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Phillips, *Wallbangin'*, p. 298.

⁴⁸ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 313.

⁴⁹ Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 322, n. 118.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 311.

⁵¹ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, pp. 205-6. PCP is a common abbreviation for Phencyclidine, an illegal hallucinogen which gives its users a capacity for prolonged

Colors was only moderately successful at the box-office, but its focus on the problems of gang violence and its representation of minority communities created a tidal-wave of public interest in Los Angeles.⁵² Even before its release, politicians and pressure groups, none of whom had yet seen the film, claimed that its screening would provoke wide-spread violence in the city and pleaded for its withdrawal. Wes McBride, the president of the California Gang Investigators Association, an association of police officers, suggested that the release of the movie would ‘leave dead bodies from one end of this town to another.’⁵³ The Guardian Angels, a right-wing group of anti-crime campaigners, protested by picketing the headquarters of Orion Pictures and the homes of its director, Dennis Hopper and its co-star, Sean Penn. After several of his members were arrested for violent conduct, Curtis Sliwa, the group’s founder, decried the film as glorifying ‘dope-sucking, psychotic-crazed young mutants.’⁵⁴ The African American community also raised its objections. An anti-gang group in Lynwood called for a boycott to avoid the risk of gang violence after screenings and Nate Holden, a prominent Councilman, whose District included South Central Los Angeles, also argued that the film should be banned, describing the city as being ‘like a powder keg’ and declaring that: ‘The First Amendment was never intended for this kind of crap’.⁵⁵ Willis Edwards, a local officer of the N.A.A.C.P., claimed

violence. At their trial, the officers involved in the arrest of Rodney King claimed that his behaviour led them to believe that he was under its influence.

⁵² *Colors* ranked twenty-first at the U.S. box-office in 1988, with gross receipts in excess of \$46 million. Found at <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=1988&p=.htm>> on 11 May, 2008.

⁵³ ‘Gang Movie *Colors* Will Trigger Violence’, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 31 March 1988, pp. A1, A4.

⁵⁴ Bob Pool, ‘5 Arrested in Protest Over Gangs Movie’, *Los Angeles Times*, 13 April 1988, p. 4.

⁵⁵ John Crust, ‘Movie on Gangs Draws Fire on Eve of Release’, *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 14 April 1988, no page reference provided, *Colors* Clippings File, Margaret Herrick Library.

that ‘the general consensus ... was that a release of this film at this time would be inadvisable.’ However, Joel Malinak of the American Civil Liberties Union took an opposing view, arguing that officials ‘should be finding solutions to gang problems, rather than prohibiting something from being shown.’⁵⁶

Earlier newspaper reports had also indicated that both the L.A.P.D. and the District Attorney would oppose the film’s release on grounds of public safety, but these suggestions were subsequently denied by Chief Gates who, having seen a preview, confirmed that the L.A.P.D. would not seek to ban the film or take any special action around its release.⁵⁷

Dennis Hopper, speaking on NBC television’s *Today Show* on Friday 15 April 1988, felt obliged to defend his film as follows: ‘I’m merely pointing my finger at a problem and saying there’s a major problem in Los Angeles. It’s a crack problem, and it’s a problem that kids are killing each other. And it’s not a movie problem.’⁵⁸ Although Hopper’s defence conveniently ignores the profit motive which underpins everything that Hollywood produces, there is no doubt that his film placed the spotlight firmly on a gang-culture which was outside the normal experience of many Angelenos and, in so doing, provided an additional stimulus to the existing public debate.

Unsurprisingly, the opening of the movie attracted a significant amount of media attention. The Guardian Angels were pictured on the front page of a section of the *Los Angeles Times* as they pursued their law-and-order agenda by protesting outside a Westwood cinema, carrying a large placard with the words: ‘KAREN TOSHIMA DIED OF GANG VIOLENCE’. Anticipating the risk of disturbances from the presence of gang-

⁵⁶ Bob Pool and Eric Malnic, ‘13 Arrested at Colors Opening: Scuffles Erupt at Hollywood, Huntington Park Theaters’, *Los Angeles Times*, 16 April 1988, Metro, pp. 1, 4.

⁵⁷ Deborah Caulfield, ‘Colors Furor Disturbs Director’, *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, undated, no page reference provided, *Colors Clippings File*, Margaret Herrick Library.

⁵⁸ Pool and Malnic, ‘13 Arrested at Colors Opening’, Metro, p. 4.

members in the audience, theatre-owners launched extra security measures in cinemas but, although a small number of young men were arrested for ‘scuffles’, audiences generally viewed the movie under normal conditions. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported, ‘despite predictions that the movie would spark widespread outbreaks of gang warfare, officials ... reported no trouble.’⁵⁹

If audience behaviour was calm, critical reception was more turbulent and included allegations that the film glorified criminals, failed to acknowledge the social and economic deprivation that encouraged gang membership, and ignored or misrepresented the lives of ordinary citizens in inner-city communities. Although *Colors* breaks new ground in its screening of street gangs in Los Angeles, the film uses the problems of gang-violence and drug trafficking as the backdrop to its main narrative, which is primarily concerned with the relationship between two police officers. Given that the producers, screen-writer, director and stars of the movie are white men, it is no surprise that the film reflects a distinctly white point of view and that its depiction of African Americans and Latinos led many critics to condemn what they saw as crude racial stereotyping. Nevertheless, by devoting significant screen-time to gang-culture and to the deprived inner-city locations where it flourished, *Colors* marks an important milestone in Hollywood’s treatment of the closely-related issues of race and space in Los Angeles, opening up new cinematic territory which would subsequently be explored from a different perspective by African American directors in the ‘ghetto-centric’ films of the early Nineties.

The film’s representation of the L.A.P.D. followed *The New Centurions* and *The Choirboys* in dealing openly with the tensions inherent in policing the inner-city. However, through its focus on gang-violence, a highly charged issue in the wake of the Toshiba

⁵⁹ Pool and Malnic, ‘13 Arrested at Colors Opening’, *Metro*, p. 1.

killing and the onset of Operation Hammer, *Colors* provided a much starker depiction of the challenges arising from the racial and spatial dimensions of law enforcement in Los Angeles. The movie also illustrated several specific aspects of policing which were firmly rooted in the history of the L.A.P.D. and which would prove to be unsustainable in the years ahead. Its para-military operating style remained dependent upon a prevailing ethos of ‘command and control’ and upon the rapid deployment of a relatively small number of officers across a huge territory. Although obliged to deal with an increasingly multi-racial population, it remained an overwhelmingly white, male force, especially in its elite divisions and its higher ranks.

Although *Colors* features an African American and a Latino in L.A.P.D. command positions, there are several other scenes which reflect the demographics which prevailed in the force in 1988. For example, an early briefing-room scene shows only one African American within a group of approximately twenty C.R.A.S.H. officers, while a panel of senior officers which reviews the shooting of an unarmed African American by an L.A.P.D. officer is composed entirely of white men. Moreover, by telling its story largely from the point of view of its two white male stars, the film gives an appropriate racial dimension to the composition of an elite unit and its officers’ perspective towards African American and Latino gang members.

Throughout its history, the L.A.P.D. had been regularly accused of excessive use of force when dealing with minorities and, throughout the 1980s, complaints of police brutality and awards of compensatory damages rose steadily.⁶⁰ In 1991, following its investigation of the L.A.P.D. in the wake of the Rodney King beating, the Christopher Commission would report evidence of ‘a significant number of L.A.P.D. officers who

⁶⁰ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, pp. 334-35.

repetitively misuse force and persistently ignore the written policies and guidelines of the Department regarding force.’ The report also noted that the operational philosophy of the L.A.P.D. was incompatible with the ‘values underlying community policing, most fundamentally restraint and mutual respect. L.A.P.D. officers are trained to command and to confront, not to communicate’. It went on to argue that ‘promotion should not be given simply for arrest statistics, but for innovation and creativity in developing crime prevention programs.’⁶¹ Joe Domanick argues that, in the later years of Daryl Gates period as Chief, the traditional command and control approach had become untenable and suggests that ‘proactive policing’ had become ‘a reward mechanism, a promotional system’, with promotional boards receiving minimal information about excessive force complaints. The most favoured routes for career advancement were the special units such as Metro, or C.R.A.S.H., where preferred candidates were aggressive officers with high arrest records.⁶²

The extent to which the ingrained culture of the L.A.P.D. would prove to be stubbornly resistant to change is illustrated by a study published in 1997, six years after the report of the Christopher Commission and five years after the forced retirement of Chief Gates. Based upon observations made while accompanying L.A.P.D. officers, sociologist Steven Kelly Herbert identified six ‘normative orders’ which he used to analyse police behaviour, one of which he described as a combination of *machismo* and a spirit of adventure. In an organisation with an historical ethos of ‘proactive policing’, he described a militarised culture which glorified and sustained men of action, the ‘cavalry’ who would ride to the rescue. When combined with conditions of particular stress or excitement, this culture could lead to a rapid use of force. As examples, Herbert cites the potential surge of

⁶¹ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, pp. 142-44, quoting *Report of The Independent Commission*, 1991.

⁶² Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, pp. 338-39.

adrenaline involved in the pursuit and arrest of a subject or the tensions arising from working in a minority area, where a significant percentage of the population may be hostile to the police. In his opinion, gang-members represent a particular challenge to this behaviour, since gang-culture tends to glorify those who gain respect through acts of daring, and who see conflict with police officers as a chance to prove themselves. Inevitably there are occasions when police officers need to act quickly and bravely, but Herbert identifies the risk to community relations which can arise from an excessive dependence upon this spirit of adventure and *machismo*. From his perspective, the alternative approach of relying upon non-violent alternatives as a means of dispute resolution, was rarely evident in an aggressive, white-male dominated and militaristic force.⁶³ However, at the heart of *Colors* is the often-problematic relationship between two officers with very different views of how their job should be done: one who personifies aggressive policing and one who represents a patient, less confrontational presence.

Bob Hodges (Robert Duval) is the older officer in a classic Hollywood partnership of wily veteran and impetuous rookie. After more than nineteen years on the force, he is a calm and confident presence on the street where his preferred *modus operandi* is to work closely with the gang members, creating relationships and exchanging favours in order to pursue his targets. By assuming a reasonable position, which includes a willingness to turn a blind eye to relatively minor infringements, he hopes to gain intelligence which can assist with major arrests. His behaviour reflects tacit acceptance that the police on the street are so heavily outnumbered that it is impossible for them to enforce the law rigidly on all occasions. His non-confrontational approach is based upon conviction rather than

⁶³ Herbert, *Policing Space*, p. 95. The other normative orders are defined as Law, Administrative Control, Safety, Competence and Morality.

cowardice and, whenever a physical challenge arises, he is an effective and willing combatant.

If Hodges embodies a style of policing which values community relationships, then his partner serves as a poster-child for an attitude which confirmed all the fears of minority communities about the L.A.P.D. and is reflective of the zero-tolerance mentality which produced Operation Hammer. In the character of Danny McGavin, *Colors* provides a striking illustration of the problems which could arise when the L.A.P.D.'s 'command and control' mentality was combined with an aggressive physical approach. As a newcomer to C.R.A.S.H., McGavin holds his first conversation with Hodges in the men's room where the younger man is ostentatiously combing his hair:

Hodges: Who are you?

McGavin: Rocky VI.

Hodges: What did you say you do for a living?

McGavin: I'm a guardian of masculinity, man.

McGavin is self-confident to the point of cockiness and, by identifying himself with Rocky Balboa, he provides a reference to the type of cinematic hyper-masculinity associated with Sylvester Stallone. This reference is re-emphasised in a later scene where McGavin is working out in the weight-room and wearing a 'muscle shirt' which displays his highly-developed biceps. The nature of the masculinity which he sees himself protecting becomes obvious fairly quickly. McGavin's determination to confront and command quickly leads to baton blows, fists and gunfire, either when meeting resistance, or in response to perceived slights. He obviously relishes his street name, 'Pacman', a reference to his regular destruction of police vehicles in reckless chases.

As the officers begin to interact with witnesses or suspected offenders, the differences in their styles of policing quickly become apparent. Hodges repeatedly argues

that a measured approach is far more likely to yield results than are constant aggressive tactics and, at one stage, he seems to get his message through to McGavin by using a joke, a crude sexual metaphor in which a relaxed approach allows two bulls to enjoy the favours of not just one cow, but an entire herd. However, any chance of rapport is destroyed by the issues surrounding High Top (Glen Plummer), an African American gang member. In an early scene, after finding a small amount of crack cocaine in High Top's possession, McGavin wants to make an arrest, arguing that even a minor charge would lengthen his criminal record and would thus ensure that any future transgressions would receive harsher sentences. However, Hodges insists that they release him without charge, on the understanding that High Top will reward his present leniency with a future favour. When High Top is later identified as a key member of a drugs ring, McGavin is openly critical of Hodges' earlier decision and channels his frustration into acts of aggression on the street. He sadistically spray-paints the face of a young Latino 'tagger' whom he has caught in the act of defacing a wall and, angry after failing to find evidence, he assaults an African American drug dealer. Finally, he implies that Hodges is a coward, accusing him of constantly 'dicking around in the car', unwilling to join in the action on the street.

McGavin's behaviour towards African American and Latino suspects exemplifies excessive use of force and, coming from a white policeman, would certainly be seen as racist by the victims of his aggression. Despite the extreme nature of some of his actions, critical reaction to his character was relatively muted. In the white-owned media, his behaviour was variously described as 'hotheaded' and 'simplistic', 'naive and malicious' or like 'a young Dirty Harry.'⁶⁴ *Variety* described him as 'a high strung and cocksure

⁶⁴ Roger Ebert, 'Colors Shows True Nature of Gangs', *Chicago Sun-Times*, 15 April 1988, p. 33; Sheila Benson, 'Complexity and Context Washed Out of Colors', *Los Angeles Times*,

volunteer. He not only busts them with bravado but roughs 'em up out there.'⁶⁵ Even in African American media, criticism was relatively mild. Alan Bell, writing in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* suggested that Hodges should have told McGavin to 'calm down and stop being so arrogant', while the film critic of the *Atlanta Daily World* described him as 'no-nonsense'.⁶⁶ John Huerta, a Latino attorney writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, described McGavin as 'a self-centered, obnoxious and offensive rookie cop eager to show gang members who is the toughest.'⁶⁷

Although McGavin is frequently seen as an aggressor in his dealing with minority suspects, his working relationship with other police officers does not seem to be affected by their race and, in a romantic sub-plot, he has a brief affair with Louisa (Maria Conchita Alonso), a Latina whom he meets while she is working at a coffee-stand. Charles Ramirez Berg describes Louisa's character as embodying two distinct Latina screen stereotypes. Initially, she is the 'dark lady', the fascinating Latin woman whose apparent inaccessibility unfailingly arouses the sexual appetites of white men. However, when it emerges that her cousin was the tagger whose face McGavin sprayed with paint, she brings the affair to an end. Despite McGavin's pleas, she refuses to reconcile, accusing him of having 'a mean heart'. Louisa then returns to her roots and, when McGavin investigates a drive-by shooting in the *barrio*, he finds her half-dressed in a bedroom from which a gang-member has just made his exit. Now obviously, in Berg's words, a 'slave to her passions', Louisa has

15 April, 1988, Calendar, p. 6; Jim Hoberman, 'Protective Coloration', *Enclitic*, Issue 21, Fall 1988, vol. 11 no. 1, pp. 43-4.

⁶⁵ *Variety*, 13 April 1988, p. 13.

⁶⁶ Alan Bell, 'Colors: Was This Film Necessary?', *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Thursday 21 April 1988, p. A7; William A. Scott III, 'A Listen To A Master Rapper', *Atlanta Daily World*, 28 April 1988, p. 6.

⁶⁷ John Huerta, 'When A Movie Hits Home Turf: A Gritty Look But No Insight', *Los Angeles Times*, 24 April 1988, Calendar, p. 5.

transformed herself into another Latina stereotype: the harlot.⁶⁸ McGavin is visibly upset by Louisa's overt sexuality and by her harsh, taunting attitude, and his behaviour indicates that his original affections for her were genuine rather than exploitative. Although Louisa is notable as the only featured Latino character who is not a gangster, the ties of the *barrio* still link her closely to its young men, despite their gang affiliations.

John Huerta's article in the *Los Angeles Times*, which condemned the male black and Latino characters in the movie as 'despicable, uni-dimensional, and mostly negative role-models', also suggested that, by 'going to bed with Penn on the first date', Louisa had acted out a stereotype of women 'as purveyors of sexual gratification'. More generally, he argued that the film portrayed minority communities as 'crime-ridden' and offered 'no insight into the causes of gangs and gang violence' nor any understanding of 'the differences between Latino and black gangs'.⁶⁹ Despite Huerta's concerns, there were relatively few signs of indignation within the pages of *La Opinión*, the leading Latino newspaper. A few days before *Colors* was released, journalist Roberto Rodriguez had suggested that the Latino community was itself partly responsible for the gang-problem since it had traditionally accorded almost heroic status to gangsters.⁷⁰ On 13 April, a front-page article quoted a Guardian Angels representative complaining that: 'Hispanics and black people are presented like drug addicts, psychotics, and murderers ... while the Anglo-Saxon policemen are the heroes, and there is not even one Hispanic or black policeman that

⁶⁸ Ramirez Berg, *Latino Images in Film*, pp. 76-77.

⁶⁹ Huerta, 'When A Movie Hits Home Turf', p. 5.

⁷⁰ Roberto Rodriguez, 'La Violencia Pandilleril: La Guerra De Todos', *La Opinión*, 10 April 1988, p. 5. (This article and all others from *La Opinión* translated by Alejandra Valenzuela.)

is presented in a positive role for their communities.⁷¹ However, three days later, actor Gerardo Mejía, whose role as a gang-member in the film made his impartiality suspect, argued that *Colors* clearly indicated the futility of a gangster's life which, in his opinion, could only lead to imprisonment or death.⁷²

In an earlier issue of the *Los Angeles Times*, film critic Sheila Benson had argued that the film's failure to indicate the social and economic pressures faced by the African American community meant that gang members in *Colors* were portrayed as 'Rebels Without a Context' and that the 'law-abiding inhabitants' of Watts and South Central Los Angeles who 'bear the brunt of drug-related violence every week' remained 'faceless and undifferentiated'.⁷³ In a guest editorial piece, Alan Bell, the film critic of the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, produced an even stronger criticism: 'Rather than looking to the social structure and the politics of racism for answers, one comes away from *Colors* with the feeling that the disadvantaged black community as a whole is functionally malignant.'⁷⁴

These concerns regarding the stereotyping of both black and Latino communities, while obviously deeply felt, need to be assessed within the context of an action movie which uses the gang problem in Los Angeles as a setting for its blend of two familiar genres: the Western frontier narrative and the police buddy movie.⁷⁵ Two white lawmen, from different generations and with different approaches to law enforcement, are forced to

⁷¹ Clara I. Potes, 'Arrestos y protestas por la película *Colors* sobre la guerra de pandillas,' *La Opinión* 13 April 1988, p. 3.

⁷² Juan Rodríguez Flores, 'Gerardo Mejía es "Bird" en *Colors*, el filme dirigido por Dennis Hopper,' *La Opinión* 16 April 1988, pp. 1-2.

⁷³ Sheila Benson, 'Complexity and Context Washed Out of *Colors*,' *Los Angeles Times*, 15 April 1988, Calendar, p. 1.

⁷⁴ Alan Bell, '*Colors*: A Monochromatic View of Gang Life in Los Angeles,' *Los Angeles Times*, 18 April 1988, Metro 2, p. 7.

⁷⁵ Examples of buddy movies involving police officers include *Beverly Hills Cop* (1985), *Lethal Weapon*, *48 Hours* (1982) and *Hollywood Homicide* (2003).

spend their days attempting to control a hostile territory, in which the peace-loving majority of the native population is terrorised by a small group of bloodthirsty young renegades who reject the rule of law. The heroes must overcome the men of violence, maintain a relationship of trust with the wider community and, simultaneously, resolve their own differences. A fictional entertainment, filmed from a white point of view and constructed from this blend of genres and narrative structures is an unlikely candidate to provide comprehensive and balanced coverage of either the African American or the Latino community. However, despite its undeniable and, in my opinion, dramatically justifiable focus on gang-members, I believe that, at least in two brief scenes, the film avoids ‘malignancy’ and does provide more broadly based representation of some important aspects of the African American community. It also provides insights into conflicting points of view within that community: a desire for gang-violence and drug dealing to be curbed, a concern that innocent people may be swept up in police actions and wariness over the L.A.P.D.’s reputation for excessive force against minorities.

The funeral of Robert Craig, a Blood who is killed in an early scene, provides a glimpse of the wider African American community which contrasts sharply with the gang members in its midst. The funeral service is held in a small church, with a congregation divided into distinct groups. The minister and the choir members, who represent the traditional power of religion in the African American community, are supported by a number of apparently respectable and soberly dressed mourners, all of whom appear to be completely at home in the church. They include Craig’s mother, a well-groomed, attractive woman, whose efforts to provide guidance for her son are praised by the minister. However, the remainder of the congregation consists of young men, Bloods like Craig and casually dressed in predominantly red clothes which vividly illustrate the gap between

generations: one aspiring to respectability through the conventional routes of church, school and employment; the other seeking respect on the streets through gang affiliations and the sale of crack cocaine. This scene also underlines the impotence of conventional notions of authority and morality when confronted with the gangster's propensity for extreme violence and callous indifference to loss of life. Just as the minister is demanding that the 'scourge of gang violence' must be 'driven from the streets' and convincing his congregation not to be 'afraid of these hoodlums', the service ends in chaos and terror as the Crips stage a drive-by shooting and rake the church with fire from automatic weapons.

Colors provides another window on black life in its dramatisation of a meeting between the L.A.P.D. and local residents which captures several significant strands of opinion regarding politics, economics, policing and gang-related problems. The scene opens with a plea from a black officer for people to be prepared to come forward and testify: 'We're outnumbered, we're outgunned. We're tired and we need your help.' However, while the police have prioritised a temporary cleansing of identified trouble-makers, the residents have a much wider range of concerns which are revealed through a series of comments made in an increasingly fractious atmosphere:

There ain't no jobs out there.
 The reality in the street is that the dope dealer has the Mercedes Benz, the money
 and the women.
 We need some protection.
 Shaking us down, shining their lights into our eyes. Treating us all like criminals.
 'Cos of where we live. And right in front of our kids.
 It ain't about what you got in your hand, it's what the people want.

These statements capture, fairly concisely, the essence of the problems which gang-culture presented for the wider black community: the difficulties of the employment market are contrasted with the huge financial rewards which are available from drugs, while the desire for more police on the streets is tempered by the L.A.P.D.'s reputation for a lack of

respect for the black community and for racial profiling. This conflict between fear of crime and fear of the L.A.P.D., which Haile Gerima had illustrated twelve years earlier in *Bush Mama*, is shown to persist, even in a period of extreme violence. The final point reaffirms that the problem cannot be solved merely by outgunning the gangs, but depends on a more holistic approach which includes community backing. Although brief, this scene illustrates the tensions within a society which passionately desires an end to the problems of gang violence but which also recognises the complexity of the problem and the absence of a simple solution.

A few days after the Los Angeles première of *Colors*, in a case of mistaken identity, the Deputy District Attorney of Compton, himself an African American, was stopped at gun-point by three L.A.P.D. officers. He then wrote to the *Los Angeles Times* complaining that: ‘This film and the recent hysteria surrounding the age-old problem of gang violence in the African American community have legitimised a local state of affairs reminiscent of Nazi Germany and the Old South and akin to modern South Africa.’ In the same letter he went on to capture the dilemma faced by many residents of South Central Los Angeles: ‘Many black people are relieved by the arrest and expulsion of large numbers of our children and youths from the black community, even though many of the arrestees are not gang members. If we are not careful, however, we shall have sacrificed our freedoms along with those of our children and permitted our entire community to be placed under permanent siege.’⁷⁶

African American concerns over gangs were also evident a year later when a *Los Angeles Times* article quoted several residents of South Central Los Angeles urging the

⁷⁶ Legrand H. Clegg II, Chief Deputy City Attorney Compton, ‘Dealing With Problem of Gang Violence’, *Los Angeles Times*, 30 April 1988, Metro, Letters Desk, p. 9.

police ‘to show little regard for the rights of gang-bangers.’ However, the same article quoted black activists decrying Hammer as ‘a myth of action’ which ‘lays the basis for police abuse and misconduct’.⁷⁷ Even Gates acknowledged that Hammer’s apparent successes were short-lived but, predictably, blamed forces beyond his control, including local politicians who refused to continue funding the operation and ‘the laxity of the criminal justice system which lacked the necessary prison facilities to cope, and released criminals too quickly.’⁷⁸ Although his period in command was marked by multiple instances of questionable police conduct against minorities, throughout the late 1980s, the Chief still managed to maintain significant political support in minority areas. A poll conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* in March 1988 found that his approval rating was fifty-one percent among African Americans, sixty-one percent among Latinos and sixty-five percent among whites.⁷⁹ Any police activity described as a ‘hammer’ clearly signalled a robust approach to handling suspects but, even in South Central Los Angeles, local politicians were initially more concerned with combating crack cocaine and gang violence than with controlling any excesses of the police.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, Hammer also created substantial tensions within the African American community, and support declined rapidly after it became apparent that gang activity was undiminished and that an entire generation of young African Americans was being alienated or criminalised by indiscriminate police action.⁸¹ Most independent commentators agree that the impact of Hammer on minority communities further

⁷⁷ Darrell Dawsey, ‘Many People Want Police “Hammer” to Hit Gangs Harder’, *Los Angeles Times*, 4 July 1989, Metro Desk, p. 1.

⁷⁸ Gates and Shah, *Chief*, pp. 339-40.

⁷⁹ David Freed, ‘The Times Poll: Performance Of Gates, LAPD Get High Marks’, the *Los Angeles Times*, 28 March 1988, Metro, p. 1.

⁸⁰ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, p. 17.

⁸¹ Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 284.

established the reputation of the L.A.P.D. as an army of occupation and became a significant underlying cause of the riots of 1992.⁸²

Colors reaches its conclusion in a complicated sequence of events surrounding a gang conflict, which has indirectly resulted from a combination of McGavin's reputation as a man of violence and Hodges' system of trading favours. After High Top is eventually arrested he identifies Rocket (Don Cheadle), as the murderer of Robert Craig. Then, in a botched police raid which is targeted at Rocket, an innocent African American is killed by an L.A.P.D. officer, and the man's shocked girl-friend wrongly identifies McGavin as the man who fired the fatal shot. Rocket then issues orders to the Crips for McGavin to be killed, but one of Hodges informants, the Latino gang-leader Frog, learns of the plan while in jail and tips him off. Unfortunately, Rocket is able to deduce that Frog was the source of the tip-off, and a gang war between blacks and Latinos ensues. In one of the ensuing arrests, Hodges is shot and killed, while McGavin survives and kills Hodges' assailant.

Despite being a fictional entertainment, *Colors* undoubtedly stimulated additional public interest in a subject which was already firmly located at the centre of contemporary discourses of law enforcement in Los Angeles. Its direct engagement with gang violence provided powerful illustrations of the difficulties faced by a mostly white police force, seeking to 'command and control' the inner city and to limit the damage caused by gangs and drugs. The film also underlined the particular problems between the police and the African American community. For young black gang members, seeking power, prestige and wealth within what Mike Davis has termed the 'political economy of crack', the

⁸² Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, p. 325; Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 316; Cannon, *Official Negligence*, pp. 17-18.

L.A.P.D. represented an armed threat to their ambitions.⁸³ For the majority of African Americans who were not gang members, their desire to rid their communities of gang violence was tempered by their fear of harassment by a police force which for many years had been accused of using race as a determinant of criminality.

The variety of locations used in filming *Colors* enhanced its illustration of the links between race and spatiality in Los Angeles. Most of the gang violence and most of the police time is confined to inner-city areas with long-established racial associations: East Los Angeles for the Latinos of the Twenty-First Street gang and Watts and South Central Los Angeles for the Crips and Bloods. Kenneth James Fox has pointed out that, as the highly mobile white police officers 'patrol and attempt to control' these depressed areas, point-of-view shots from inside the police cruiser allow the director to 'construct their travels as a surveillance exercise' in which non-white residents 'are viewed as being on the other side of the fence, to be surveilled or contained'.⁸⁴ However, one important scene takes place in Venice, an area of Los Angeles with an eclectic population which includes the hip, the homeless and the wealthy. Venice has a significant number of white residents but the attractions of its famous beach-front promenade are a magnet for a wide range of people of all races, including tourists, drug dealers and gang members. As Hodges and McGavin are patrolling the beach area, they catch sight of Hightop and give chase, eventually cornering him in a crowded, up-market restaurant on Venice Boulevard. Although he attempts to escape by holding a woman at gunpoint, he is finally subdued after a fight which wrecks most of the dining area and the kitchen. By dumping the gang issue, almost literally, into

⁸³ Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 309.

⁸⁴ Fox, *Cinematic Visions of Los Angeles*, pp.79-80.

the laps of affluent white Angelenos, the scene acts as an unwitting echo of the death of Karen Toshima on the streets of Westwood.⁸⁵

As Aaron Baker has pointed out, *Colors* is ultimately ambivalent about the relative merits of the two, very different styles of policing exemplified by its main protagonists. Although, initially, it seems to suggest that Hodges' reasonable and patient approach offers a more appropriate solution to the gang problem than does the aggression of McGavin, in two significant scenes it seems to take a different viewpoint. The initial failure to arrest High Top underlines the potential risks in ignoring minor offences to gain future favours and, at least temporarily, makes Hodges' use of dialogue seem to be less effective than McGavin's more aggressive approach. Then, when Hodges is shot, the position of his younger partner as both survivor and avenger carries the inference that the future for policing in minority areas rests with those who are quick to resort to force.⁸⁶ Despite these conflicting signals, I agree with Jude Davies in interpreting the final scene as an indication that McGavin's experiences have served as a rite of passage into a 'mature and caring masculinity'.⁸⁷ He has been paired with a new, African American recruit to C.R.A.S.H. who is hyper-aggressive and who describes himself as a 'bad, black, kick-ass, rock'n roll kind of cop'. McGavin, now the senior partner, tries to persuade the rookie to take a more relaxed view and, by using Hodges' joke about the bulls and the cows to make his point, clearly indicates that he has absorbed some of his former partner's approach to policing the streets. Despite this belated portrayal of McGavin as a reformed character, the real-life

⁸⁵ Unwitting since the filming of *Colors* was completed before Toshima's killing.

⁸⁶ Aaron Baker, 'Beyond the Thin Line of Black and Blue: Movies and Police Misconduct in Los Angeles', in Murray Pomerance (ed.), *Bad: Infamy, Darkness, Evil and Slime on Screen* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 58.

⁸⁷ Jude Davies, 'Against the Los Angeles Symbolic: Unpacking the Racialised Discourse of the Automobile in 1980's and 1990's Cinema', in Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (eds.), *Screening The City* (London and New York: Verso, 2003), p. 228.

events of the next few years would quickly, and unfortunately, reveal that the attitude to policing which his character had represented for most of the film was still prevalent in many officers and would continue to undermine any grounds for optimism about relationships between the L.A.P.D. and the African American and Latino communities. Just like Roscoe Rules in *The Choirboys*, McGavin, as a representation of an L.A.P.D. officer, is a cinematic signpost which points the way towards the arrest and beating of Rodney King and the fire and bloodshed which would follow.

3. *Boyz N the Hood* (1991)

Testimony from a variety of witnesses depict the LAPD as an organisation with practices and procedures that are conducive to discriminatory treatment and officer misconduct directed to minority groups.

Report of The Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department, July 1991, p. xii.

On 8 August 1988, the rappers Niggaz With Attitude or N.W.A., as they more-usually styled themselves, released what would become their breakthrough album, *Straight Outta Compton*. Its success secured the reputation of this quartet of Los Angeles-based musicians as leading exponents of gangsta rap, a genre of popular song which had become synonymous with life in the African American ghetto. The lyrics of this increasingly popular form of musical expression were notorious for their profanity, their glorification of violence and their anti-police sentiments, all of which were in evidence on a track which accused the police of racism and brutality:

Fuck tha police comin straight from the underground
A young nigga got it bad 'cause I'm brown
I'm not the other color so police think
They have the authority to kill a minority⁸⁸

Almost four years later, on 9 July 1991, the Christopher Commission reached a very similar conclusion, albeit couched in more measured language: ‘The Commission has found that there is a significant number of LAPD officers who repetitively misuse force ... The problem of excessive force is aggravated by racism and bias within the LAPD.’⁸⁹ While N.W.A.’s visceral attack demanded only four minutes of its listeners’ time, the Commission’s report needed almost three hundred pages to accommodate its detailed analysis of the shortcomings of the L.A.P.D., together with recommendations for its

⁸⁸ Lyrics from N.W.A., ‘Fuck Tha Police’, *Straight Outta Compton* (Ruthless Records, 1988).

⁸⁹ *Report of the Independent Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department*, pp. ix and xii.

structural reform. Three days after its publication, a feature film was released which managed to conflate these two, very different, strands of criticism: the poetic rage of gangsta rap and the more elegantly phrased, but equally damning, prose of Warren Christopher. Although *Boyz N the Hood* had been completed before the Rodney King beating and thus before the Christopher Commission was empanelled, it nevertheless provided cinema audiences with a dramatised examination of the policing of South Central Los Angeles which vividly endorsed many of Christopher's findings. The coincidence of timing between an eagerly awaited official report and the release of a highly anticipated movie ensured that, in July 1991, the subject of law enforcement received saturation coverage in the local media and dominated civic discourse in Los Angeles.

Warren Christopher, the moving force behind the Commission which bore his name, was a child of the Great Depression, a New Deal liberal who had graduated from U.S.C. and Stanford Law School. A prominent member of the predominantly white 'Downtown elite' of Los Angeles, Christopher had served in the administrations of both Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter and, in 1993, would become Bill Clinton's Secretary of State.⁹⁰ John Singleton, the director of *Boyz N the Hood*, came from an entirely different generation and from a different racial, social, economic and cultural background. A twenty-three year-old African American graduate of U.S.C. Film School, Singleton's early upbringing was divided between upwardly mobile, unmarried parents who lived separately in South Central Los Angeles and in the neighbouring city of Inglewood. His teenage years coincided with the introduction of crack cocaine, with the accompanying increase in gang violence and with the large-scale police sweeps of Operation Hammer. Although some of Singleton's friends had gang associations, in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, he

⁹⁰ Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 102.

credited his father with providing the inspiration to pursue his studies and to keep his distance from gang activity, explaining that, if he had joined a gang, ‘my Pops would have kicked my ass.’⁹¹

This formative parental influence may have kept Singleton from becoming a gang-member but, nevertheless, his teenage years were spent listening to the music most closely associated with gang-culture. By 1991, gangsta rap dominated the soundtracks of most contemporary black films but, given Singleton’s age and his upbringing, it is perhaps no surprise that its influence is most obvious and pervasive in *Boyz N the Hood*. The film’s soundtrack is dominated by rap music and its title is derived from a track on an album by N.W.A., released in 1987 and including lyrics which dealt explicitly with street-violence.

Young niggaz at the pad throwin up gang signs
 Ran in the house and grabbed my clip
 With the Mac-10 on the side of my hip
 Bailed outside and pointed my weapon⁹²

The extent to which studio executives recognised the link between gangsta rap and box-office success is underlined by a letter to the *New York Times* from the Chairman of Columbia Pictures, confirming that, while the primary audience for *Boyz N the Hood* was young blacks, an important secondary target was ‘young whites, primarily those who listen to music like that in the film.’⁹³ In an interview with the British film magazine, *Sight and Sound*, Singleton emphasised how that music had influenced his own work by describing

⁹¹ Patrick Goldstein, ‘His New Hood is Hollywood’, *Los Angeles Times* 7 July 1991, pp. 6.

⁹² N.W.A., ‘Boyz-n-the-Hood’, *N.W.A. and the Posse* (Macola Records, 1987). A Mac 10 is an automatic machine pistol.

⁹³ Frank Price, letter to the *New York Times*, 2 August 1991, p. A14, referenced in Watkins, *Representing*, p. 189.

himself as a cinematic equivalent of a rap artist: 'I'm just saying the same thing that the hard-core rappers are saying. They say it on wax, and I'm saying it on film.'⁹⁴

Released at the end of a week in which public scrutiny of the L.A.P.D.'s approach to policing in general, and to African Americans in particular, had reached elevated levels, the film contained all the ingredients necessary to raise the temperature even further. *LA Weekly* noted that *Boyz N the Hood* 'could hardly have been released at a more fitting time than the week of the Christopher Commission Report' and, in these circumstances, it was no surprise that it became the subject of intense media criticism and public discussion.⁹⁵ The *Los Angeles Times* published ten separate articles related to the film, including a four-page spread in its arts supplement, while the 11 July edition of the black-owned *Los Angeles Sentinel* included four separate articles on its Arts Page. The release of *Colors*, which had coincided with the beginning of Operation Hammer, had generated a similar amount of public attention but, while Hopper's film had only limited box-office success and received little critical acclaim, Singleton's movie, which had been made for only \$6,000,000, went on to gross \$60,000,000 in its first year, becoming the most commercially successful black film in history.⁹⁶ It was lauded at the Cannes Film Festival and would receive two Oscar nominations, including Best Director, but perhaps the most remarkable aspect of *Boyz N the Hood* is the impact which it apparently had on California State Governor Pete Wilson. According to *The Hollywood Reporter*, after giving the movie a 'rave review', Wilson, a right-wing Republican who governed California from 1991 to 1999, opined that the movie had demonstrated that 'tough anti-crime laws and police

⁹⁴ Peter Brunette, 'Singleton's Street Noises', *Sight and Sound*, vol.1, no. 4, 1 August 1991, p.13.

⁹⁵ John Powers, 'Los Angeles Burning', *LA Weekly*, 26 July-1 August, 1991, p. 31.

⁹⁶ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, pp. 166, 184.

enforcement, while necessary, are not enough to get illicit drugs off the streets.’ The report went on to claim that ‘a day after seeing the movie, Wilson added four top health officials to the drug advisory panel, which had been dominated by police and prison officials.’⁹⁷

Even before the Christopher Commission report was published, *Boyz N the Hood* had emulated *Colors* in generating significant public interest well ahead of its first commercial screening, including much speculation that its subject matter, and especially its violent content, posed a risk to public order both inside and outside theatres. These fears partly stemmed from the disturbances surrounding Mario Van Peebles’ *New Jack City*, which had premièred at the Mann Plaza in Westwood on 6 March, a few days after television had broadcast the King tape. On that Friday evening, after the theatre management had denied admission to a number of young African American men, apparently as a result of accidental overselling, black violence was once again reported on the streets of an area which had traditionally been seen as a playground for wealthy whites.⁹⁸ The *Los Angeles Times*, estimating that ‘hundreds’ were involved in the disturbance, was quick to associate the disorder with the King incident, using statements from eye-witnesses to allege that the ‘violence was fueled, at least in part, by tensions created by the highly publicized beating of a black motorist by Los Angeles police officers last week. ... Some youths shouted "Black Power!" and "Fight the Power!" as they roamed the streets and made angry references to the videotaped beating. ... Outraged merchants said that police had been warned about the possibility of violence linked to the opening of the movie, which features the volatile rap artist Ice-T. They said police appeared reluctant to

⁹⁷ ‘Governor hails *Boyz* message’, *The Hollywood Reporter*, 30 August 1991, p. 6.

⁹⁸ As noted above, in January 1988, the death of Karen Toshima on the streets of Westwood triggered the chain of events which resulted in Operation Hammer.

stop the looters and blamed the timid response on the public outcry over the controversial beating of Rodney G. King.⁹⁹

The disturbances in Westwood support Laura Baker's contention that, in the early Nineties, a combination of the renaissance in black film, the scarcity of 'first-run theaters' in the inner city and the increasing tendency to build large multiplexes in up-market areas resulted in black youths being increasingly drawn into spaces primarily designed to attract a white clientele.¹⁰⁰ Predictably, the problems associated with *New Jack City* persuaded the Mann Plaza in Westwood to turn down the opportunity to screen *Boyz N the Hood* but, in a more surprising development, the *Los Angeles Times* also reported that the African American owners of the Baldwin Theater on South La Brea Avenue had only decided to show the film 'at the last minute.' General manager Nelson Bennett decried 'the early marketing campaign that tended to play up the violence in the movie', but justified the decision to go ahead with the screening on the grounds that '*Boyz N the Hood* was important.'¹⁰¹ Apprehension was not confined to distributors and several pressure groups also took the opportunity to air their concerns. Los Angeles N.A.A.C.P. Vice-President William Upton regretted the film's exclusion of 'positive aspects of black life', while Mike Selgado of 'Parents Against a Gang Environment' argued that: 'The police are portrayed badly, particularly with the movie coming out so close to the Rodney King incident. We

⁹⁹ Elaine Woo and Irene Chang, 'Rampage in Westwood: Hundreds Loot Stores, Riot', *Los Angeles Times*, 10 March 1991, p. 1. 'Fight The Power', by Public Enemy, features prominently in *Do The Right Thing*.

¹⁰⁰ Laura Baker, 'Screening Race: Responses to Theater Violence in *New Jack City* and *Boyz N The Hood*', *Velvet Light Trap*, no. 44, Fall 1999, pp. 5, 11.

¹⁰¹ David J. Fox, 'Boyz; One Theater's Debate', *Los Angeles Times*, 13 July 1991, p. 1.

felt this would only heighten tensions and asked Columbia to postpone the release of the movie.’¹⁰²

On Friday 15 July, the film opened nationally at more than eight hundred cinemas, many of whom had increased security amid concerns of gang-violence, fears which had been exacerbated by Columbia’s decision to make violence the focus of their promotional trailers. Although, in recent years, there had been inaccurate speculation that both *Do The Right Thing* and *Colors* would incite disturbances, on this occasion the apprehension of local cinema owners was justified by a series of incidents, with three patrons being shot inside the Cineplex Odeon in Universal City, and five additional shootings in cinemas across the Greater Los Angeles area.¹⁰³ Frank Price, the Chairman of Columbia Pictures, had initially described the calls to restrict the movie’s exhibition as ‘like saying you shouldn’t let Eugene O’Neill tell stories about the Irish because it will drive them to drink.’¹⁰⁴ However, when violence became a reality the film-makers rushed to defend the film and to characterise its message as one of peace. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that a ‘visibly shaken’ John Singleton ‘expressed sympathy for victims and appealed to the perpetrators for an end to the violence.’ Speaking at ‘a hastily called news conference’ at the Four Seasons Hotel in Beverly Hills, Singleton claimed that the acts of violence were ‘indicative of the degeneration of American society, not a reflection of my film, which is about family, love and friendship.’ Wearing a baseball cap marked with words ‘Boyz N the

¹⁰² Tammerlin Drummond, ‘The Early Buzz on *Boyz: It’s All Too Real*’, *Los Angeles Times*, 7 July 1991, p. 22.

¹⁰³ Kellie Russell, ‘8 Shot at Southland screenings of *Boyz*’, *Press-Telegram* (Long Beach, CA), 13 July 1991, pp. A1, A6.

¹⁰⁴ Drummond, ‘The Early Buzz On *Boyz*’, p. 23.

Hood/Increase the Peace’, he went on to place blame on a society that ‘breeds illiteracy and economic deprivation ... There's a whole generation of people who are disenfranchised.’¹⁰⁵

Singleton’s comments were reminiscent of the argument made by Dennis Hopper when confronted with threats of violence associated with the opening of *Colors*. Hopper had suggested that his story of gang violence reflected ‘a major problem in Los Angeles’, rather than a ‘movie problem.’¹⁰⁶ Both directors were understandably concerned about the future economic prospects for their respective movies, although Singleton could claim, with some justification, that his film contained a strong sense of morality and a message of hope for the black community. Nevertheless, he had initially endorsed Columbia’s decision to emphasise violence in the trailers, on the grounds that it was necessary to attract young black men to see the film or, in his own words, that ‘it got mother-fuckers into the theatre.’¹⁰⁷ Nor were his pre-release comments especially conducive to ‘increasing the peace’. On July 7, the *Los Angeles Times* quoted him as saying that: ‘ever since black people were brought here—dragged kicking and screaming out of the mother-land—we’ve been under some police state, whether it’s slavery or the LAPD.’ He went on to discuss the rage felt by young black men arising from indignities suffered at the hands of the police: ‘if I was talking on the phone to my girl-friend, some cop could take me for a suspected drug dealer It’s psychological lynching.’¹⁰⁸ Then, in an interview which was eventually published in *BAM* on 26 July, Singleton seemed to advocate a fairly selective approach to law and order: ‘Nobody is born a killer. Black people in this country have always lived

¹⁰⁵ Scott Harris, Jim Herron Zamora, ‘Nationwide Violence Mars Opening of *Boyz Movie*’, *Los Angeles Times*, 14 July 1991, p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ Pool and Malnic, ‘13 Arrested at Colors Opening’, *Metro*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁷ Alan Light, ‘Not Just One Of The *Boyz*’, *Rolling Stone*, 5 September 1991, pp. 74-5, referenced in Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 183.

¹⁰⁸ Goldstein, ‘His New Hood is Hollywood’, p. 7.

under a kind of police state. I'm very suspect of a black man who's called a criminal in a society that turns him into a criminal ... where I'm from there's no set law. The authority doesn't have respect for me, so why am I going to have respect for authority? I have to worry about being shot by the brother around the corner as much as I have to worry about being shot by the LAPD. So I'm going to carry a gun too.'¹⁰⁹

In addition to Singleton's inflammatory remarks, his film's obvious association with gangsta rap was a significant cause of heightened public alarm. Its star was Ice Cube, a founder member of N.W.A., who had written and partly performed the infamous *Fuck Tha Police* before leaving the group in 1989. After success as a solo artist, Ice Cube had then followed the example of Ice-T in becoming an actor and made his screen debut in *Boyz N the Hood*. Apart from underlining the film's potentially controversial nature, Paula Massood has argued that Ice Cube's history and his celebrity also provided local box-office appeal and 'a chain of meaning' which supported the film's claims to authenticity.¹¹⁰ Such claims were further supported by the use of locations in South Central Los Angeles to illustrate family life in an area which was home to the overwhelming majority of the city's African American population. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Singleton noted that, in his own childhood, there were no movies which 'reflected where we were coming from' and that he had grown up wanting 'to see something about me.'¹¹¹

Although independent African American films such as *Sweetback* and *Bush Mama* had used South Central Los Angeles and Watts, respectively, as their principal settings, before *Boyz N the Hood*, those few Hollywood movies to include any lengthy footage of the

¹⁰⁹ Jerry McCulley, 'John Singleton's *BOYZ N THE HOOD*: Black America In Search Of A Father Figure', *BAM*, 26 July 1991, p. 40.

¹¹⁰ Paula J. Massood, 'City Spaces and City Times: Bakhtin's Chronotope and Recent African American Film', in Shiel and Fitzmaurice (eds.), *Screening the City*, p. 205.

¹¹¹ 'John Singleton: A Boy From The Hood', *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 11 July 1991, p. B10.

inner city had generally used the locations to frame the exploits of their white heroes. The procedurals of the 1940s and 1950s had effectively ignored minority populations but, from the 1970s onwards, Hollywood movies such as *The New Centurions* had made increasing use of inner-city locations and had introduced African American and Latino characters. The focus on street-gangs in *Colors* meant that the majority of its action was set in the *barrios* of East Los Angeles and the African American population centres of South Central Los Angeles and Watts. However, although the participation of Ice-T in its musical soundtrack had gained *Colors* some local credibility, its perspectives on the inner city were provided by white actors, a white director and a white screen writer and the film's concentration upon gang members attracted significant criticism from the African American community. According to John Hartl, writing in *The Seattle Times*, the critics included Singleton himself who had 'nothing but contempt for ... *Colors* which he found objectionable because it focuses on two white policemen and fails to make gang members convincing.'¹¹²

David E. James has argued that the major studios have generally ignored the realities of the history and geography of Los Angeles, preferring to evoke audience memories of earlier media representations through cinematic signifiers such as the HOLLYWOOD sign, beach-front homes in Malibu or, in crime films, the concrete-lined bed of the Los Angeles River. In his opinion, such representations are over-determined by the requirements of the medium, reflecting the prevalent view that successful international marketing requires Los Angeles to be an easily recognisable setting.¹¹³ Paula Massood takes a similar viewpoint to James, but emphasises race and socio-economics in arguing that traditional Hollywood settings are in fact projections of Hollywood's own wealthy

¹¹² John Hartl, 'Boyz the best Spike Lee movie that Lee never made', *The Seattle Times*, 7 July 1991, p. K4.

¹¹³ James, 'Towards a Geo-Cinematic Hermeneutics', p. 27.

white self-image and have thus excluded entire neighbourhoods from the screen. In her opinion, the black film-making of the early 1990s signalled significant change by bringing to the screen previously unobserved aspects of African American life in Los Angeles and allowing South Central in particular to change from an ‘invisible city’ to ‘the hood’. She contends that the ‘hood’ films used the ghetto both as a detailed geographical entity and as a metaphor for the urban African American experience.¹¹⁴

Despite a grim beginning in which documentary-style sub-titles announce that ‘One out of every twenty-one black males will be murdered, most of them at the hands of another black male’, *Boyz N the Hood* was the first film in wide-spread distribution to show black life in South Central at street level, without placing gangs at the centre of its action. Although the film makes it clear that violence is an inescapable fact of growing-up in the inner city, overt gang references are largely restricted to minor differences in clothing. *Boyz N the Hood* provides an insight into African American family life which affirms its director’s faith in what he sees as the crucial societal role of fatherhood. Essentially a coming-of-age melodrama, it explores the strains experienced by young black men as they approach maturity in South Central, while the fates of its three main protagonists exemplify some of their most likely routes out of the ghetto: education, sports, incarceration and violent death.

As Ed Guerrero has pointed out, the film’s main protagonist, Tre Styles (Cuba Gooding, Jr.) is clearly one of the ‘talented tenth’ and has the additional benefit of strong guidance from his father. Furious Styles (Laurence Fishbourne), a local mortgage broker, makes sure that Tre works hard in school, avoids unplanned parenthood and does not

¹¹⁴ Paula Massood, ‘Mapping the Hood: the Genealogy of City Space in *Boyz N The Hood*’, *Cinema Journal* vol. 35, no. 2, 1 January 1996, pp. 85, 88-89.

become involved with drugs or gang violence.¹¹⁵ However, Tre's friends and neighbours, the Baker brothers, have been raised by their mother in a household in which no-one appears to have a job and is presumably dependent upon welfare. In the absence of any positive male role model, the brothers are shown to be more vulnerable to the temptations of the street. Ricky (Morris Chestnut) is a talented football player with prospects of an athletic scholarship at U.S.C. but he struggles with scholastic work and, although still at high-school, already has a live-in girlfriend and a young son. His older brother Doughboy (Ice Cube) has served time in juvenile institutions and in jail and, like the majority of young black men in South Central is unemployed, apparently making a living from small-time drug-dealing.¹¹⁶ After a relatively trivial clash with a group of young men, coded as gang members by some red items of clothing, a perceived lack of respect develops into a vendetta and, while walking home from the grocery store, Ricky is gunned-down on the street in front of Tre. Although he is enraged by Ricky's death and initially accompanies Doughboy on his quest for revenge, the values instilled by his father bring Tre to his senses and lead him to abandon the pursuit. Doughboy eventually kills his brother's murderers but, as we learn in the epilogue, will himself-be shot and killed two weeks later. Only Tre manages to escape his surroundings, avoiding the fate of his childhood friends and joining his girlfriend in attending a prestigious African American college in Atlanta.

The opening scenes of *Boyz N the Hood* are set in South Central Los Angeles in 1984, a time when drugs and gangs are already every-day hazards and, in Singleton's words, when 'the influx of crack really started to happen.'¹¹⁷ The sense of time and place is

¹¹⁵ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 184.

¹¹⁶ Susan Anderson, 'A City Called Heaven: Black Enchantment and Despair in Los Angeles', in Scott and Soja (eds.), *The City*, p. 358.

¹¹⁷ Hartl, 'Boyz', p. K4.

made clear, not only by sub-titles and by the soundtrack of contemporary music but also by the bullet-ridden poster of Ronald Reagan which, in the opinion of Paula Massood, effectively links his administration's policies with the prevailing social and economic conditions: unemployment, poverty, drugs and crime.¹¹⁸ As Manthia Diawara has pointed out, most of Tre's childhood references seem to involve policing: the 'Police Line: Do Not Cross' tape around a murder scene, the images of patrol cars and helicopters among the children's artwork in the classroom, and the omni-present sounds of sirens and helicopters.¹¹⁹ By the time the film reaches its conclusion in 1991, South Central is firmly in the grip of the crack epidemic and, despite the large-scale sweeps of Operation Hammer, young black men are constantly at risk from gang-violence. Although police officers are only represented as minor characters and occupy minimal amounts of screen time in *Boyz n the Hood*, Singleton follows the example set by Gerima in *Bush Mama* by including multiple visual and aural references to police activity and thus making the L.A.P.D. a constant and threatening presence throughout the film. The most persistent example is the recurring sound of a police helicopter, reflecting both the long-standing para-military ethos of the L.A.P.D. and its reputation for intrusive surveillance. In an interview with John Hartl, Singleton himself accused the L.A.P.D. as thinking of itself 'as the FBI or CIA, with all these technological toys', while Hartl continued the military analogy by describing the director's view of South Central as: 'a war zone, with gunfire interrupting students doing homework, children finding dead bodies while they're playing in a park and helicopters constantly shining spotlights into the streets.'¹²⁰ However, Kenneth Turan, the film critic of

¹¹⁸ Massood, 'City Spaces and City Times', p. 205.

¹¹⁹ Manthia Diawara, 'Black American Cinema: The New Realism' in Diawara (ed.), *Black American Cinema*, p. 21.

¹²⁰ Hartl, 'Boyz', p. K5

the *Los Angeles Times*, a newspaper with a predominantly white readership, provided a different perspective which neatly captured the long-standing tension between the desire of African American communities to control street crime and their fear of a potentially abusive police presence. While recognising the intrusiveness of police helicopters as ‘the buzz of a nightmare that won’t quite go away’, Turan also identified a justification for their presence ‘on perpetual prowl, insistently searching South-Central Los Angeles for the violence and crime that hang over that part of the city like a debilitating, pestilent haze.’¹²¹

Although Singleton’s film was completed before the Christopher Commission began its deliberations, its representations of police officers provided its audience with examples of police behaviour which, in their own dramatic fashion, endorsed many of the Commission’s detailed findings. Warren Christopher’s report packed almost three hundred pages with what Lou Cannon described as an ‘accumulation of data, interviews and analyses’ in order to make the case that ‘minorities ... had reason to fear the police who were supposed to serve and protect them.’¹²² In contrast, Singleton needed only two brief scenes to provide a vivid depiction of the L.A.P.D. as an organisation which holds the African American citizens of Los Angeles in contempt and which, in the eyes of that community, is synonymous with racism and excessive use of force.

In 1984, shortly after the young Tre has moved in with his father, a burglar breaks into the house. Furious takes his gun from a bedside table and fires at the intruder, who escapes unharmed. Father and son then have to wait for ‘almost an hour’ before an L.A.P.D. patrol-car finally responds to their emergency call. The delay underlines a common complaint that, in inner city areas, the police were slow to respond to requests for

¹²¹ Kenneth Turan, ‘Boyz’ Life Growing Up in South-Central: A Gritty *Boyz In the Hood*’, *Los Angeles Times*, 12 July 1991, p. 1.

¹²² Cannon, *Official Negligence*, p. 144

assistance. These officers are clearly well outside the L.A.P.D. standard 'seven-minute response to calls for service' and, when they eventually arrive, their behaviour leaves much to be desired.¹²³ Officer Graham (Kirk Kinder), a white man, is relatively polite and business-like but Officer Coffey (Jessie Lawrence Ferguson), his African American colleague, is portrayed as aggressive and disrespectful:

Officer Graham: We got a call of a burglary here.

Furious: That was about an hour ago.

Officer Coffey: (Speaking while drinking coffee and eating a doughnut) Whoa! We didn't ask you that.

Furious: Yeah, well, I told you. Besides, I don't like having my son out in the cold.

Officer Graham: Just tell me what happened, sir.

Furious: Somebody broke into the house. I fired at him with my piece, and he ran away.

Officer Coffey: You didn't get him?

Furious: If I did, he'd be laid out here in front of you, right!

Officer Graham: Is there anything missing?

Furious: No.

Officer Coffey: Good, no need to make out a report.

Officer Graham: (Speaking from the car) Got a 415 on Florence between Vermont and Normandie.¹²⁴

Officer Coffey: Too bad you didn't get him. Be one less nigger out there in the streets we have to worry about. Hey, little man, how you doing?

Furious: Go on in the house, Tre. Go on.

Officer Coffey: Something wrong?

Furious: Something wrong? Yeah. It's just too bad you don't know what it is ... brother.

Officer Coffey's behaviour exemplifies many of the criticisms voiced by the Christopher Commission. Although the officers are late arriving on the scene, when Coffey first speaks to Furious he is still in the process of eating and drinking, underlining his lack of concern and obviously failing to present a professional image. His aggressive demeanour underlines the Commission's point that 'too many LAPD patrol officers view citizens with

¹²³ *Report of The Independent Commission*, pp. xiv and 98.

¹²⁴ Either by luck or by an eerie prescience, Singleton has located this emergency call at the site of the initial flashpoint of the 1992 riots which began at the junction of Florence Boulevard and Normandie, in South Central Los Angeles.

resentment and hostility; too many treat the public with rudeness and disrespect.’¹²⁵ His comment that the absence of any theft would make a report unnecessary echoed the importance which the L.A.P.D. placed upon arrest statistics. He is obviously uninterested in investigating the crime and would prefer not to have an unsolved case on the record. The Commission made specific reference to this issue in espousing a crime-prevention model which ‘places service to the public and prevention of crime as the primary role of police in society and emphasizes problem solving, with active citizen involvement in defining those matters that are important to the community, rather than arrest statistics. Officers at the patrol level are required to spend less time in their cars communicating with other officers and more time on the street communicating with citizens.’¹²⁶ Finally, Coffey’s contemptuous regret that Furious did not kill the burglar, thus ensuring ‘one less nigger’ on the streets, not only indicates a lack of respect for human life and a propensity for vigilante justice but is another example of those ‘offensive remarks’ which the Commission identified L.A.P.D officers using across ‘the spectrum of racial and ethnic minorities in the city.’¹²⁷

The second scene is set in 1991, Tre’s final year in high-school, and is even more damning. Without any obvious justification, the same two officers pull Tre and Ricky over in a traffic stop and, although both young men behave calmly, the officers approach the car with guns drawn and order Ricky and Tre on to the pavement.

Officer Graham: Driver! Put your hands on the steering wheel!

Officer Coffey: (Frisking Tre) Got any drugs or weapons on you?

Tre: No. I didn't do nothing.

Officer Coffey: (Pressing gun against Tre’s throat) You think you tough? You think you're tough, huh? You scared now, huh? I like that. That's why I

¹²⁵ *Report of the Independent Commission*, p. xiv.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, p. xv.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, p. xii.

took this job. I hate little motherfuckers like you. Little niggers, you lyin' shit! Think you tough, huh? I could blow your head off with this Smith and Wesson and you couldn't do shit. How you feel now? What set you from? Look like one of them Crenshaw Mafia motherfuckers. No, you probably one of them Rolling 60s, huh?

Dispatcher (overheard on radio): 12-Adam-63, we have a possible 187 in blue VW at corner of Florence and Vermont. Again, a possible 187 in blue VW at corner of Florence and Vermont.

Officer Graham: Stay out of trouble.

Officer Coffey: You gentlemen have a nice evening now, you hear?

The ordeal at gunpoint obviously terrifies Tre and, by the time that the brief encounter ends, he is in tears and feels humiliated and powerless. There is no apparent motive for the traffic-stop and Coffey's suggestion that Tre may be a member of either the Bloods or the Crips seems to be based upon prejudice rather than on observation, since members of each gang normally took care to affirm their respective affiliations through distinctive coloured clothing.¹²⁸ The brutality of his physical treatment, the accusations of gang-membership and the violence of the officers' language are perfect illustrations of another Commission concern: 'LAPD officers verbally harassing minorities, detaining African American and Latino men who fit certain generalised descriptions of suspects, employing unnecessarily invasive or humiliating tactics in minority neighbourhoods and using excessive force.'¹²⁹ In this critical scene, Singleton uses the power of the motion-picture to produce a perspective on policing which reflects some of the hatred of the police that could be found in the violent and profane lyrics of gangsta rap. His film provides powerful testimony that, even before the King beating, young black men in South Central had reason to view the L.A.P.D. as a hostile force, a perspective which was given increased credibility by the conclusions of the Christopher Commission.

¹²⁸ As Bloods, the Crenshaw Mafia would normally be associated with red clothing while, as Crips, the Rollin' 60s would normally wear blue. Found at <<http://www.streetgangs.com/>> on 26 April 2009.

¹²⁹ *Report of the Independent Commission*, p. xii

Apart from exemplifying the commonly held assumption that L.A.P.D. officers use a combination of race and geography to assess criminality, the scene also demonstrates what Paula Massood has described as the ‘paradox of the automobile’ in Los Angeles.¹³⁰ Tre’s car provides mobility and social status, but also brings danger, especially when boundaries are crossed. In contemporary Los Angeles parlance ‘D.W.B.’ (Driving While Black), is at least as recognisable an offence as the official acronym D.W.I., or Driving While Intoxicated and, in a city built around the automobile, is a predictable source of anger and frustration for black men. The flashpoint for the Watts riot was an apparently routine traffic stop, while the beating of Rodney King followed a police chase in which three black men in a car were pursued from a freeway into a residential area. Inevitably, the automobile also brings death, in the shape of the drive-by shooting which kills Ricky. Meanwhile, as Jude Davis has pointed out, the constant presence of L.A.P.D. patrol cars signifies the physical and psychological confinement of the black community in the ‘spatial apartheid’ of Los Angeles.¹³¹

Although the history of the L.A.P.D. is replete with accounts of white policemen victimising black men, in each of these two scenes, Singleton, who is on record as a critic of black officers, chose to cast the African American officer as the villain. Patrick Goldstein, writing in the *Los Angeles Times* after interviewing the director, noted that: ‘It’s a measure of Singleton’s disdain and alienation that the most-hated authority figure ... is a black cop. He complains that, when the LAPD “virtually lynched” Rodney King, one of the first groups to support Police Chief Daryl Gates was the Black Policemen’s Association.’ In the same interview Singleton indicated that, at least in part, his depiction of the black

¹³⁰ Massood, ‘Mapping the Hood’, p. 93.

¹³¹ Davies, ‘Against the Los Angeles Symbolic’, p. 225.

officer could be read as a plea for change: ‘I can’t change white cops. But I think I can change the minds of some black cops. They shouldn’t care more about doughnuts and coffee than they care about people in the community.’¹³² Black officers were also tempting targets for rappers and if Singleton had been looking for inspiration, it was available in N.W.A.’s lyrics as early as 1987:

And on the other hand, without a gun they can't get none
 But don't let it be a black and a white one
 Cause they'll slam ya down to the street top
 Black police showing out for the white cop¹³³

In conversation with John Hartl of *The Seattle Times*, Singleton claimed that, in his youth, he was himself verbally abused by a black police officer and also provided a damning verdict on the behaviour of the ‘relatively civilised’ white policeman, who says nothing because: ‘it’s not his ... place, they’re not his people and his partner doesn’t care. There’s a large number of whites that could care less what happens to blacks.’¹³⁴ By using the black officer as the villain of the piece, Singleton creates a ‘code reversal’ which, in the opinion of Craig Watkins, demonstrates the pervasiveness of the assumption that blackness and criminality are linked so that, in the eyes of an L.A.P.D. officer, whether black or white, all young black men are potential criminals. Tre is not committing any traffic offence, he is driving an innocuous Volkswagen Beetle rather than a flashy ‘ghettomobile’, and neither his clothing nor his demeanour indicate gang affiliations. Nevertheless, in Los Angeles, even an outstanding young man like Tre risks being criminalised by his colour.

¹³² Goldstein, ‘His New Hood is Hollywood’, pp. 6-7, 22-27. Singleton’s reference to coffee seems to confirm that Officer Coffey’s name is meant to remind his audience of the familiar calumny which links L.A.P.D. officers with an excessive interest in coffee and doughnuts.

¹³³ N.W.A., ‘Fuck Tha Police’.

¹³⁴ Hartl, ‘Boyz’, p. K4.

In their different ways, both the Christopher Commission report and *Boyz N the Hood* illuminated the long-standing tensions between the L.A.P.D. and African American men and thus placed the King beating within the context of a fatally flawed relationship. Nevertheless, both works also allowed the citizens of Los Angeles to enjoy a brief period of optimism about the future of the city and of its police force. Even though the *Los Angeles Sentinel* observed that the Commission had only documented what ‘African Americans ... knew all along’, its recommendations were supported by most local politicians and seemed to offer an opportunity for genuine reform.¹³⁵ Such a prospect was made more likely by the presumed departure of Daryl Gates, a Chief who had become an icon of police oppression to the black community. Meanwhile, in the cinema, Tre Styles’ success in escaping unscathed from a childhood in South Central to attend a prestigious university has been interpreted by Ed Guerrero as an indication that ‘an enterprising individual’ could succeed against the odds, provided that his choices were ‘consonant with ... dominant values.’¹³⁶ Yet, within less than a year, these political and cultural grounds for optimism would disappear after a ‘not guilty’ verdict in a Simi Valley courtroom triggered an explosion of black rage and plunged Los Angeles into the chaos and bloodshed of the 1992 riots. Although Chief Gates eventually resigned in the aftermath of the disturbances, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* correctly predicted that the ‘problems will not vanish on Gates’ retirement’ and, under his two African American successors, the reputation of the L.A.P.D. continued its descent in an apparently irreversible spiral.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Larry Aubry, ‘The Christopher Commission: Beyond The Report’, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 18 July, 1991, p. A7.

¹³⁶ Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, p. 186.

¹³⁷ Aubry, ‘The Christopher Commission’, p. A7.

By 1992, gangsta rap once again became embroiled in discourses of law enforcement when Ice-T's new group, Body Count, released an album including the track 'Cop Killer', which attacked Chief Gates over the King incident and which attracted condemnation from President George H. Bush, Vice-President Quayle, 'Tipper' Gore and many police associations.¹³⁸ *Boyz N the Hood* briefly re-appeared in political discourse, when Governor Pete Wilson, speaking in a television interview in the aftermath of the riots, praised its emphasis upon the importance of fatherhood in the black community as an alternative to dependence upon welfare and opined that 'everybody in America' should see the film.¹³⁹ However, in 1993, Richard Riordan won the mayoral election by exploiting the white backlash from the 1992 riots, campaigning with the slogan 'Tough enough to turn L.A. around' and promising to fund three thousand additional police officers.¹⁴⁰ In that same year, the cinema provided a very different version of African American life in Los Angeles when the Hughes brothers released *Menace II Society* (1993), a bleak film which used Watts as its backdrop to portray the contemporary inner city as the site of violence, alienation and despair. In what the directors intended to be a direct *riposte* to the sentimentality which they had perceived in *Boyz N the Hood*, Tre Styles, the brightest and the best of his generation in South Central, was superseded by Caine Lawson (Tyrin

¹³⁸ Mark S. Hamm and Jeff Ferrell, 'Rap, cops, and crime: clarifying the "cop killer" controversy', found at <<http://www.axt.org.uk/HateMusic/Rappin.htm>> on 20 October 2009. Although the offending album was recalled by Warner Brothers, some of Ice-T's supporters accused his detractors of racism, pointing out that Eric Clapton's 'I Shot The Sheriff' had not received any comparable criticism. Ice-T continued to demonstrate his versatility in his regular role as an N.Y.P.D. detective in *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (N.B.C. Television, 1999-2010).

¹³⁹ Watkins, *Representing*, p. 224, citing comments made by Wilson on *This Week With David Brinkley* (ABC News, 1981-1996), 3 May 1992.

¹⁴⁰ Itabari Njeri, 'The Menace of Nihilism', *Los Angeles Times*, 29 August 1993, Magazine, p. 34.

Turner).¹⁴¹ Described by Norman Denzin as an ‘existential anti-hero’, Caine’s childhood and teenage years are characterised by a nihilistic strain of violence which seems to lead inexorably to his death on the streets.¹⁴² A film which denied the existence of hope for young black men in the inner city would, infamously, lead one conservative political commentator to suggest that U.S. troops on overseas peace-keeping duties would be better-employed in Los Angeles.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Massood, ‘Mapping The Hood’, p. 93.

¹⁴² Norman K. Denzin, *Reading Race*, p. 126.

¹⁴³ George F. Will, ‘Therapy From a Sickening Film’, *Los Angeles Times*, 17 June 1993, no page reference provided, *Menace II Society*, Clippings File, Margaret Herrick Library.

V. Bad Cops

1. Introduction

We were the finest. We were the best in the world. We were a department that people came from all over the world to study, to look at, to see how we accomplished so much with so little

Daryl Gates.¹

In the second half of the twentieth century, more than one hundred films were produced in which the L.A.P.D. played an important role and, before the 1990s, only a handful had included any serious examples of police misconduct, or even police incompetence. In part, the relative scarcity of negative representations can be explained by the history of policing in the city, which is peppered with accusations of excessive force used by white officers against racial minorities. Throughout the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, in common with their approach to most forms of contemporary racial conflict, Hollywood studios had generally ignored this aspect of Los Angeles law-enforcement and, even after *Sweetback* had undermined the conservative image of cinematic policing, their approach remained tentative. Both *The New Centurions* and *The Choirboys* touched upon issues of racism and brutality but most mainstream movies avoided this sensitive area until *Colors* tackled the highly topical issue of gang-violence. Only three years later, after the Rodney King beating had shocked the nation and after *Boyz N the Hood* had vividly illustrated the tensions between the police and the African American community, this pattern of cinematic representation began to change. Over the next few years, as the L.A.P.D. suffered an apparently unending series of calamities, Hollywood movies set in Los Angeles regularly included ‘bad cops’, a broad cinematic canon including those guilty of racism and brutality,

¹ Daryl Gates, former L.A.P.D. Chief, speaking on *Frontline*, 27 February 2001.

those who break the law in pursuit of their own version of justice and those whose motives are as criminal as their actions.

No justice, no peace!

Although, throughout the 1990s, most public concern would be focused upon the failings of the L.A.P.D., the citizens of Los Angeles would also pay a heavy price for the ‘judicial negligence’ which Lou Cannon has identified in the conduct of two, apparently unrelated, criminal trials.² On 16 March 1991, only thirteen days after the beating of Rodney King, a misunderstanding over a carton of orange juice led to a violent argument in the Empire Liquor Deli, a Korean-owned store in South Central Los Angeles. Latasha Harlins, a fifteen-year old African American girl, threw several punches and the shopkeeper, Soon Ja Du, first threw a chair and then grabbed the revolver which she kept behind the counter. Seeing the gun, Harlins turned and began to walk out of the store but was shot in the back of the head and died at the scene. Seven months later, an in-store video recording of the incident led a jury to find Du guilty of Involuntary Manslaughter, an offence which carried a maximum sentence of sixteen years imprisonment. On 15 November 1991, Judge Joyce Ann Karlin imposed a sentence of ten years which she then immediately suspended, opting instead to place Du on probation for five years and requiring her to complete ten weeks of community service. Karlin’s decision was widely condemned within the African American community and an editorial in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* described the punishment as ‘bizarre’, ‘a travesty’ and ‘pitifully inadequate’. The columnist then argued that the leniency of the sentence made it clear that the justice system

² Cannon, *Official Negligence*, Chapter 8, ‘Judicial Negligence’, pp. 174-92.

was inherently biased against African Americans: ‘First it was the police. Now it is the judges who have become the messengers of this chilling edict: there is a different standard that is applied if you are Black—suspect or victim, it doesn’t matter.’³

Although Koreans, as an ethnic group, had found a profitable niche in the ownership of convenience stores and liquor stores in the inner city, as shop-keepers they had a history of troubled relationships with young African American customers.⁴ The Du verdict further inflamed this long-standing hostility but, at the time, there was little realisation at the time of just how significant that antagonism would become. Ten days later, another legal decision was taken which would have far more predictable consequences. Since the beating of Rodney King had taken place within the Los Angeles city limits, under normal circumstances the trial of the L.A.P.D. officers involved should have taken place in Los Angeles County. However, fearing that the unprecedented levels of publicity might jeopardise a fair trial, the California Court of Appeal agreed to a request from defence attorneys for a change of venue. For a case in Los Angeles County, where only two such requests had been granted in the previous twenty-five years and none since 1973, this decision was highly unusual. The final choice of location was left to the discretion of Judge Stanley Weisberg, who elected to hold the trial in Simi Valley, a small town in Ventura County where television and press coverage was provided by the same television stations and newspapers which served Los Angeles County but which, perhaps coincidentally, was within convenient commuting distance of Judge Weisberg’s residence.⁵ More significantly, while less than two percent of its population were African American,

³ ‘An Outrageous Decision’, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 21 November 1991, P. A6.

⁴ Lucie Cheng and Philip Q. Yang, ‘Asians: The “Model Minority” Deconstructed’, in Roger Waldinger, and Mehdi Bozorgmehr (eds.), *Ethnic Los Angeles* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996), p. 329.

⁵ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, pp. 176-85.

Simi Valley was home to more than twenty-four percent of the L.A.P.D.⁶ African American dismay at the decision was evident and was starkly summarised in the prescient comments of John Hatcher III, President of the Ventura County Chapter of the N.A.A.C.P: ‘They would be better off going to Mississippi. Rodney King is on trial, not those officers. King will lose and the officers will win.’⁷

On 29 April 1992, Hatcher’s prediction was proven to be correct when, despite the apparently damning evidence provided by George Holliday’s videotape, the predominantly white jury identified sufficient doubt to find the officers not guilty of all charges.⁸ A few hours later, South Central Los Angeles was consumed by violence and looting, an explosion of anger which demonstrated the frustration of the black community at an apparent injustice, the willingness of sections of some Latino communities to join in scenes of public disorder, and the inability of the L.A.P.D. to keep order in the streets. Within four days, fifty-eight people had been killed, over two thousand injured and more than nine thousand arrested while property damage amounted to more than one billion dollars.⁹ Unlike the riots of 1965, which had been largely confined to the Watts ghetto and were seen on news bulletins mostly through film recordings, the riots of 1992 were racially complex, spatially dispersed and broadcast live by news reporters whose helicopters allowed unrestricted access to trouble-spots.¹⁰ Although Latinos were prominently involved in the looting and general mayhem, it was assaults by blacks against whites which provided

⁶ Woods, *The Police in Los Angeles*, pp. 285-86.

⁷ ‘King Trial Venue: “Slap in the Face” Says Ventura NAACP’, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 12 December 1991, p. A15.

⁸ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, p. 189. The jury comprised ten non-Hispanic whites, one Latino and one Asian American.

⁹ Virginia I. Postrel, ‘The Real Story Goes Beyond Black and White’, *Los Angeles Times*, 8 May 1992, p. A11.

¹⁰ See Appendix, Map 5, p. 323.

television viewers with a series of horrifying images.¹¹ The most infamous incident, involved Reginald Denny, a truck driver who chose the wrong time to arrive at the epicentre of the violence. In what Lou Cannon describes as ‘a tableau of brutality’, Denny was pulled from the cab of his vehicle by a small group of young, black men, beaten senseless with a hammer and a block of concrete and then savagely kicked while lying unconscious.¹² However, with the perceived injustice of the verdict in the trial of Soon Ja Du still fresh in mind, a significant degree of African American violence was also directed towards Korean stores in South Central Los Angeles and more generally towards homes and businesses in nearby Korea Town. Sensing reluctance by the L.A.P.D. to provide appropriate protection, many Korean merchants responded with their own show of armed force and, by brandishing automatic weapons on roof tops, provided some of the most iconic images of the riots.¹³

The chaos which engulfed Los Angeles marked the final blow to the credibility of Daryl Gates, who was criticised for his failure to plan for the possible consequences of an acquittal and for his conduct in the early hours of the conflict. Shortly after the disturbances had begun, the Chief chose to abandon his post at L.A.P.D. headquarters in order to attend a fund-raiser in Brentwood for opponents of Charter Amendment F.¹⁴ In his absence, the L.A.P.D. command-structure appeared to be paralysed, failing to mount any decisive early intervention and proving to be hopelessly ill-prepared to deal with the eventual scale of the

¹¹ Sonesheim, *Politics in Black and White*, p. 264.

¹² Cannon, *Official Negligence*, p. 305.

¹³ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, ‘The LA “Race Riot” and Contemporary U.S. Politics’, in Robin Gooding-Williams (ed.), *Reading Rodney King: Reading Urban Uprising*, pp. 97-103.

¹⁴ Despite Gates’ efforts, Amendment F became law in 1992, giving force to the Christopher Commission recommendation to limit the Chief of Police to a maximum of two five-year terms of office.

disturbances, which were only quelled by the deployment of several thousand National Guardsmen and Federal troops. By the end of 1992, Gates had been forced to retire and polls taken by the *Los Angeles Times* indicated that eighty-one percent of participants disapproved of his personal performance, while only forty-five percent were satisfied with the performance of the L.A.P.D. as a whole.¹⁵

The Trial of O.J. Simpson

Gates' enforced retirement offered hope for real change within the L.A.P.D., especially since his replacement was Willie Williams, the first outsider in living memory to lead the force and its first ever African American Chief. However, Williams, a recruit from the Philadelphia Police Department, was soon to be sorely tested by a fresh controversy which once again placed Los Angeles and its police force at the centre of national attention. In 1995, the city became home to one of the biggest media events of the century in the trial of O.J. Simpson, an African American football star of the Sixties and Seventies who had become an actor and a celebrity and whose 'cross-over' appeal to the white community had been used to advertise several iconic American consumer brands, most notably *Hertz Rent a Car*. On 17 June 1994, Simpson was arrested on suspicion of stabbing and killing his estranged wife, Nicole, and Ronald Goldman, her male friend, both of whom were white. His trial, which began in January 1995, was a sensational mix of race, sex, violence and celebrity which received an overwhelming amount of media attention, including live television coverage of the entire proceedings. Simpson's highly-paid 'dream team' of

¹⁵ Jim Newton, 'The Times Poll', *Los Angeles Times*, 8 June 1996, cited in Reese, *Leadership in the LAPD*, p. 57.

attorneys managed to put the L.A.P.D. on trial, first by establishing the incompetence of the Crime Laboratory in their management of the blood evidence and, crucially, by undermining the credibility of a key witness.¹⁶ Detective Mark Fuhrman, who had testified that he had never used the word ‘nigger’, was found to have perjured himself following the discovery of a video-taped interview in which he had used the slur extensively while boasting of excessive use of force against minorities. Since Fuhrman had found the infamous ‘bloody glove’ at Simpson’s home, his loss of credibility allowed the defence to suggest that the forensic evidence linking Simpson to the murders, had been planted. After nine months of testimony, the predominantly African American jury took less than four hours of deliberation to acquit Simpson and, on 3 October 1995, the verdict was announced in front of an estimated national audience of one hundred and forty-two million television viewers.¹⁷

For the second time in three years, Angelenos had to adjust to an unexpected verdict in a racially charged trial and, once again, the combined effect of the racial composition of the jury, the speed with which it reached its verdict and its dismissal of an apparently damning body of evidence shocked the city. Although on this occasion there were no physical disturbances, the racially divisive consequences of the trial were clearly reflected in both national and local media. An ABC News national poll, carried out on the day of the verdict, indicated that seventy-five percent of whites believed that Simpson was guilty while seventy-seven percent of African Americans were convinced of his innocence.¹⁸ On the following day, an editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* claimed that, however peaceful the

¹⁶ Domanick, *To Protect and To Serve*, p. 318.

¹⁷ Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, p. 258.

¹⁸ ABC News O.J. Simpson Viewpoint Poll, October 1995, found at <<http://www.icpsrdirect.org/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/6680?archive=ICPSR&q=Simpson+Trial>> on 28 October 2009.

city may have appeared on the surface, its racial divide was deeper than ever. It described the displays of black jubilation and white outrage which followed the verdict as ‘a sad commentary on American racial divisions’ and cited unidentified polls which ‘showed most whites found the mountains of circumstantial evidence accumulated by the police and prosecution to be convincing beyond a reasonable doubt’, whereas ‘most African Americans felt possible police misconduct raised that doubt.’¹⁹ Writing in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Asadullah Samad confirmed the concerns of the black community by locating Fuhrman’s behaviour within the history of conflict between the L.A.P.D. and African Americans: ‘The Fuhrman tapes are the last in an episode of law enforcement travesties the world has come to know as the Los Angeles Police Department ... The outrage over these tapes has been a community's outrage for at least 35 years. Now it's the world's.’²⁰

These immediate media reactions subsequently gained scholarly support from Ronald Jacobs and Linda Williams, both of whom have identified, in the aftermath of the Simpson trial, a worsening of the divisions and mistrust between black and white which had been apparent since 1992.²¹ The riots of that year had themselves provided a stimulus to what Williams has described as ‘white resentment’, a sentiment based on the perception that minority groups had gained undeserved advantages and which, even before the outcome of the Simpson trial, had manifested itself both locally and nationally in economics, culture and politics. The post-Cold War decline of the aero-space industry had triggered a white exodus from Los Angeles, a trend which increased sharply in the

¹⁹ ‘The Verdict Is In: A City Divided; The Simpson trial has raised questions of police propriety and racial antipathy’, *Los Angeles Times*, 4 October 1995, p. 8.

²⁰ Asadullah Samad, ‘Fuhrman Tapes; LAPD's Dreadful Truth or One Man's God Complex?’, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 7 September 1995, p. A7.

²¹ Ronald N. Jacobs, *Race, Media and the Crisis of Civil Society: From Watts to Rodney King* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 137.

aftermath of the 1992 riots.²² In the cinema, *Falling Down* voiced the rage of a white male who had been forced to come to terms with the loss of his family, his home and his job and was also forced to face the reality of his diminished significance in multi-cultural and multi-racial Los Angeles. In local politics, Richard Riordan's 1993 Mayoral campaign successfully exploited the fears which the riots had created in the minds of white voters. In November 1994, the California electorate approved Proposition 187, which sought to restrict access by illegal immigrants to welfare and education programmes and, in that same month, Newt Gingrich led the Republicans to a landslide victory in the Congressional elections, a rout of the Democrats which *USA TODAY* described as a victory for 'Angry White Men'.²³ Even in higher-education, policy makers were swept along by the tide and, in July 1995, the regents of the University of California announced the abandonment of that institution's long-standing, race-based admissions policy, a move strongly supported by Governor Pete Wilson who described affirmative action as 'unfair and discriminatory'.²⁴

Despite the media maelstrom and the racially divisive effects of the Simpson trial, Williams' espousal of community policing and his diligence in communicating that approach continued to pay dividends and, in June 1995, a *Los Angeles Times* poll indicated that his personal approval rating stood at sixty-five percent while the L.A.P.D. as a whole was perceived as doing a satisfactory job by sixty-six percent of respondents.²⁵ Lou Cannon has described Williams as 'stolid and reassuring to a city weary of police controversy and racial conflict', while Renford Reese has argued that, by challenging the 'military minded,

²² Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, p. 257.

²³ Patricia Edmonds and Richard Benedetto, 'ANGRY WHITE MEN: Their votes turn the tide for GOP', *USA TODAY*, 11 November 1994, p. 1A. Proposition 187 was subsequently found to be unconstitutional by a Federal court and was never implemented.

²⁴ William Booth, 'U. of Calif. Ends Racial Preferences', *The Washington Post*, 21 July 1995, p. A1.

²⁵ Reese, *Leadership in the LAPD*, p. 57,

street-soldier culture’ and by refusing to countenance ‘an arrogant disregard for civil liberties’ Williams had managed a substantial improvement in the public perception of the L.A.P.D.²⁶ Unfortunately, although initially popular with the public, the new Chief was never completely accepted by the rank and file. He was overweight to the extent that he needed a specially-tailored uniform, and had repeatedly failed the Peace Officers Standards and Training Test which meant that he had to receive an official dispensation to carry a firearm. In 1994, his leadership was undermined when, declining to interrupt a family vacation, he became the first Chief to fail to attend the funeral of an officer killed in the line of duty.²⁷ His fate was sealed when, under investigation by the Police Commission, he denied allegations that he had received any free benefits, or ‘comps’, from Las Vegas hotels during his frequent visits. This denial was later exposed as a lie, and although Williams kept his job, his credibility had been permanently diminished in an organisation whose manual forbade ‘soliciting or accepting gratuities’ and in which officers who were caught in a lie were routinely dismissed. Despite the initial optimism that his appointment would lead to positive changes in the operations of the L.A.P.D., Williams was unable to make significant improvements or to shake off the legacy of the past. Amid reports of low morale and increasing concerns over accusations of improper use of force, arrests fell significantly and, under the new mayoral power arising from Proposition F, his contract was terminated at the end of his initial five year term.²⁸

²⁶ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, p. 537; Reese, *Leadership in the LAPD*, p. 55.

²⁷ Reese, *Leadership in the LAPD*, p. 152.

²⁸ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, p. 546.

The Rampart Scandal

Williams was succeeded by Bernard Parks, another African American but, unlike his predecessor, a long-serving L.A.P.D. ‘insider’ who promised leadership based upon discipline and ‘officer accountability’.²⁹ Despite these good intentions, by the end of 1998 Parks’ plans for reform were completely overshadowed by a corruption scandal, the final crisis of a disastrous decade and an event which was inconsistent with the modern history of the force. While New York City was infamous for recurring incidences of police corruption on a grand scale, most prominently recorded in the twentieth century by the Knapp Commission, police misconduct in Los Angeles had more usually been associated with racism and the excessive use of force. Although a predominantly white force which combined a ‘command and control’ mentality with para-military style deployment across the ‘spatial apartheid’ of Los Angeles had proven to be disastrous for relations between the police and minority communities, it had also minimised the possibility of officers being unduly influenced by local politicians. Organised in this fashion, in the words of Mike Davis, ‘the LAPD was intended to be incorruptible because unapproachable’.³⁰ Moreover, under Chief Parker and his successors, any suspicions of bribes or payoffs were investigated thoroughly and punished harshly. Joe Domanick has described the ‘unspoken credo’ of the L.A.P.D. in these colourful terms: ‘If you beat the shit out of someone, we’ll back you 100 percent; but, if you take one penny, your ass is ours.’³¹

The focus of the scandal was the C.R.A.S.H. unit based in Rampart, an area just to the west of Downtown which has been described by Lou Cannon as ‘a warren of dense,

²⁹ Reese, *Leadership in the LAPD*, p. 152-53.

³⁰ Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 251.

³¹ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, pp. 14, 197.

dangerous neighbourhoods that leads Los Angeles in homicides, narcotic sales and violent crimes' and which was home to a predominantly Latino population, including a large number of illegal aliens and more than sixty street gangs. Like all C.R.A.S.H teams, the anti-gang officers at the Rampart Station operated as a separate, specialised unit but this particular group had demonstrated distinct signs of becoming a force within a force. They had developed their own insignia, in the form of an 'Aces and Eights' tattoo, while the official L.A.P.D. motto 'To Protect And To Serve' had been supplanted by their own slogan 'We Intimidate Those Who Intimidate Others'.³² The scandal broke when Officer Raphael Perez was found to have stolen a large amount of confiscated cocaine and, in the hope of leniency, chose to cooperate with prosecutors. Perez testified to a horrifying pattern of criminal behaviour by his fellow officers: 'a police corruption scandal of historic proportions, involving allegations not just of widespread perjury and corruption, but of routine evidence-planting, and incidents of attempted murder and the beating of suspects.'³³ His allegations provided a broad narrative of illegal police activity which led to more than seventy officers being investigated, five of whom faced criminal charges. More than one hundred cases were re-opened and compensation payments to those improperly convicted eventually exceeded one hundred million dollars.³⁴

Despite the extent of the Rampart investigations, suspicions remain that much of Perez's testimony was motivated by the desire to deflect attention away from his own association with David Mack, a former narcotics officer and a convicted felon. In

³² Lou Cannon, 'One Bad Cop', *New York Times*, Magazine, 1 October 2000, p. 33. Aces and Eights is known by poker players as the 'Dead Man's Hand', in reference to the cards allegedly held by Wild Bill Hickock at the time of his death.

³³ *Report of the Rampart Independent Review Panel to the Police Commission*, November 16, 2000, p. 1, found at <<http://www.oiglapd.org/rirprpt.pdf>> on 13 September 2007.

³⁴ Boyer, 'Bad Cops', p. 60.

November 1997, Mack and two other, unidentified black men had stolen seven hundred thousand dollars from a branch of Bank Of America and, although Perez consistently denied any involvement, only two days after the robbery he and Mack had spent a weekend together with their mistresses at a ‘glitzy hotel’ in Las Vegas. Mack had also moonlighted for Suge Knight, the controversial owner of Death Row Records who was known to have gang affiliations and was suspected of involvement in the unsolved killing of rival rapper Biggie Smalls in 1997. During the Smalls murder investigation, at least one senior detective believed that Perez and Mack had been directly involved and eye witnesses would allege that both men had been members of Knight’s inner circle.³⁵

The problems which investigators faced in verifying Perez’s allegations were intensified by Chief Parks’ refusal to offer immunity from prosecution to any other officers who were willing to testify, a decision seen by several commentators as a deliberate attempt to minimise the scope of enquiries through a ‘code of silence’.³⁶ When the dust finally settled, only Perez and his partner Nino Durden were convicted of serious crimes and, although three other officers, including the sergeant in charge of Rampart C.R.A.S.H., were found guilty of obstructing justice and filing false police reports, their convictions were subsequently overturned by a Superior Court Judge.³⁷ Thus, so far as the general culpability of L.A.P.D. officers was concerned, the results of the Rampart investigation were inconclusive. Detractors could claim that the force had successfully managed to obscure the true scale of corruption, while supporters could point to the limited number of officers who

³⁵ Randall Sullivan, ‘The Unsolved Mystery of the Notorious B.I.G.’, *Rolling Stone*, issue 989, 15 December 2005, p. 128.

³⁶ Erwin Chemerinsky, ‘LAPD’s Rotten Apples Remain’, *Los Angeles Times*, 11 December 2001, p. M5.

³⁷ Scott Glover, ‘Three Rampart Scandal Officers Get \$15 Million’, *Los Angeles Times*, 10 February 2006, p. B1. These officers sued the City of Los Angeles for false arrest and malicious prosecution and were each awarded damages of five million dollars.

were found guilty of criminal behaviour. Joseph Wambaugh, a consistent supporter of the 'thin blue line', described the outcome as follows: 'two cops out of nearly 9000 being found guilty of corruption. Two.'³⁸

Despite generating three separate, weighty reports and extensive press coverage, the scandal was apparently of little interest to the citizens of Los Angeles in general and of Rampart in particular.³⁹ The lengthy, complex and ultimately inconclusive investigation offered little opportunity for the dramatic television coverage associated with earlier events. However, Renford Reese has also drawn attention to the apparent effectiveness of the C.R.A.S.H. unit under investigation which, even within an area as challenging as Rampart, managed to reduce gang-related crimes from more than eleven hundred in 1994 to less than five hundred in 1999, a reduction which was greater than the city-wide decline over the same period.⁴⁰ Lou Cannon supports this analysis by citing traditional Latino support for the L.A.P.D. and argues that local residents were 'more worried about emboldened gangs than police misconduct', a view which is made more understandable by the resurgence of crime after the unit was disbanded. Cannon suggests that 'Angelenos of all ethnicities tacitly condone harsh measures' when dealing with gangs, a theory which is consistent with the support given to Chief Gates by community leaders in South Central Los Angeles during Operation Hammer. In the same article, Cannon cites Erwin Chemerinsky who has provided another, equally plausible, reason for the relative lack of public interest in

³⁸ Wambaugh, e-mail correspondence to Robert Bevan, 5 February 2008.

³⁹ The reports were as follows: *L.A.P.D. Board of Inquiry into the Rampart Area Corruption Incident*, found at <http://www.lapdonline.org/assets/pdf/boi_pub.pdf> on 10 November 2009; *Report of the Rampart Independent Review Panel to the Police Commission*; Erwin Chemerinsky, *An Independent Analysis of the Los Angeles Police Department's Board of Inquiry Report*, found at <<http://llr.lls.edu/volumes/v34-issue2/chemerinsky.pdf>> on 23 October 2009.

⁴⁰ Renford Reese, 'The Multiple Causes of the LAPD Rampart Scandal', p. 88, found at <<http://www.csupomona.edu/~jis/2003/Reese.pdf>> on 3 September 2009.

Rampart by suggesting that a case without white officers and black victims was inherently less controversial.⁴¹

If the true extent of wrongdoing in Rampart remained a matter of controversy, the impact of the scandal on the L.A.P.D. was undeniable. Not only was its hard-earned reputation for incorruptibility badly tarnished but both its organisation and its governance were to be severely affected. In June 1999, voters approved an amendment to the City Charter which increased the powers of the Office of Inspector General and thus strengthened civilian oversight of the police.⁴² In March 2000, following the report of an Internal Board of Enquiry, Chief Parks disbanded all C.R.A.S.H. units. Then, in November 2000, came the final humiliation when the City Council succumbed to Federal pressure and, through a Consent Decree, agreed to submit the L.A.P.D. to a five-year period of Federal Oversight. Ironically, a police department which had once claimed to be the nation's finest and had appeared to be politically invulnerable was now brought to heel by a legal power which Congress had granted to the Department of Justice as a response to the Rodney King beating.⁴³ Chief Parks, who immediately prior to Rampart had claimed that the Christopher Commission reforms were essentially complete, suffered the same fate as his predecessor and in 2002 was removed from office after one five-year term.

⁴¹ Cannon, 'One Bad Cop', pp. 39, 40. In 2001, violent crime increased by nine percent and gang-related homicides by more than one hundred percent.

⁴² Office of the Inspector General, found at <<http://www.lacity.org/oig/isgig1.htm>> on 28 September 2009.

⁴³ The Consent Decree was finally lifted by a Federal Judge in 2009.

Bad Cops on Film

Given the toxic mixture of racism, brutality, incompetence and corruption which steadily engulfed the force in the 1990s, it is no surprise to find that, from mid-decade onwards, cinematic representations of the L.A.P.D. are often associated with police misconduct. The beating of Rodney King, which had contributed to the massive public interest in *Boyz N the Hood*, continued to resonate throughout Los Angeles and throughout the film industry. The Los Angeles riots, although invoked thematically in *Strange Days* and reconstructed as a backdrop to the storyline in *Dark Blue*, have had a more limited cinematic influence, while the O.J. Simpson case, despite its apparently highly-marketable mix of sex, race, violence, and celebrity, has not so far been the overt subject of any feature film. However, the exposure during the Simpson trial of an L.A.P.D. detective as a liar, a racist, and as someone who was allegedly willing to frame and intimidate witnesses, provided further evidence of a capacity for wrongdoing on the part of the police and played its part in informing the views of film-makers and audiences alike. The police corruption associated with the Rampart Scandal has had a more discernible influence in several movies which deal directly with this subject, including *Training Day*, *Cellular* (2004) and *Dirty* (2005), most of which reflect the ethnicity of the officers at the centre of the investigation and which therefore include African American and Latino officers in the canon of 'bad cops'. By the early years of the twenty-first century, in a remarkable contrast to the days when Hollywood had represented the L.A.P.D. as paragons of virtue, the misdeeds of cinematic officers surpassed even the worst that their real-life counterparts could offer. The hard-boiled but honest detective work of *Dragnet*'s Joe Friday had been replaced on television by the ruthless and illegal manoeuvring of Vic Mackie, the anti-hero

of *The Shield* and, in the cinema, by the murderous corruption of Alonzo Harris in *Training Day*.⁴⁴

This chapter comprises a detailed discussion of four movies, each of which engaged with one or more topics which were central to contemporary discourses of law enforcement. *Strange Days* projects the images of Rodney King and the 1992 Riots onto an apocalyptic vision of Los Angeles at the Millennium while *L.A. Confidential* provides a revisionist interpretation of the L.A.P.D. in the 1950s which was obviously informed by more recent events. *Training Day*, which takes its inspiration from the Rampart Scandal, and is set in the most crime-ridden areas of the inner city, purports to investigate the relative merits of policing which is effective and policing which follows the law. Finally, *Dark Blue* provides a coda for the 1990s by using the Rodney King affair and the riots of 1992 as a backdrop to a story of police corruption which features detectives who rival Mark Fuhrman in racism and which is consistent with the worst revelations of the Rampart scandal. The movie is also notable for rare filmic perspectives on two highly controversial topics: L.A.P.D. shooting policy and the activities of a specialist surveillance unit with a secretive nature and a lethal reputation.

⁴⁴ *The Shield* (Fox Television 2002-2008).

2. *Strange Days* (1995)

If there are movies ... whose sole intention is to say that the officers are beating, slaying, killing, robbing or whatever and they're specifically identified as Los Angeles police officers, then I have a big, big problem with that production.

L.A.P.D. Chief Willie Williams.⁴⁵

Strange Days was the first Hollywood film to devote extensive amounts of screen-time to what David Crane has described as 'the "real" representational currency of the Rodney King beating ... and the L.A. riots'.⁴⁶ Although its story is set in Los Angeles in the final hours of the twentieth century, its vision of the future is permeated with references to the events which shocked the city in the early Nineties. Its plot hinges upon a video-recording of a violent confrontation between the L.A.P.D. and an African American motorist, while its *misè-en-scene* evokes the death, destruction and general lawlessness which paralysed Los Angeles for four days in 1992. With these sensational topics at its core and with a budget of forty-five million dollars, a futuristic melodrama, which included race, violence, sex and a 'cyber-techno' rock soundtrack, seemed to have all the ingredients necessary for commercial and critical success. Director Kathryn Bigelow's previous credits included *Blue Steel* (1990) and *Point Break* (1991), while the producer and co-writer of *Strange Days* was her ex-husband, James Cameron, who had enjoyed tremendous success with the science-fiction blockbusters *The Terminator* (1984) and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991). The film's stars also appeared to be highly bankable and all had recent Oscar nominations to their credit: Ralph Fiennes for *Schindler's List* (1993), Angela Bassett for *What's Love Got To Do With It* (1993) and Juliette Lewis for *Cape Fear* (1991). Despite

⁴⁵ Donna Parker, 'LAPD chief: "No time good" for bad-cop pic', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 13 October 1995, pp. 6, 51.

⁴⁶ David Crane, 'In Medias Race: Filmic Representation, Networked Communication and Racial Intermediation', in Beth E. Kelko, Lisa Nakamura and Gilbert B. Rodman (eds.), *Race in Cyberspace* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), p. 105.

these apparent advantages and the benefit of modestly favourable reviews from nationally syndicated critics Janet Maslin and Roger Ebert, *Strange Days* turned out to be a box-office disaster, grossing less than \$9,000,000 in the United States.⁴⁷ Perhaps even more surprising, given its setting and given that the inherently controversial nature of its subject matter was coupled with a radical version of racial politics, was the film's failure to generate any significant public interest in Los Angeles.

These disappointments can be explained, at least in part, by the unfortunate timing of the film's release, which coincided with the controversial climax of a national spectacle which was also set in Los Angeles. The murder trial of O.J. Simpson was a heady mix of race, sex, violence and celebrity in which the L.A.P.D. played a leading role and which, unlike Bigelow's film, attracted huge audiences nationwide. The première of *Strange Days*, at the New York Film Festival on 7 October, came just four days after Simpson's acquittal signalled the end of a real-life melodrama which, for more than a year, had enjoyed extensive television and press coverage and which had once again placed the conduct and the competence of the L.A.P.D. at the centre of civil discourse. Its general release came in the following week, at a time when, especially in Los Angeles, assessments of the 'trial of the century' still dominated the headlines.⁴⁸

Strange Days was by no means the first film featuring the L.A.P.D. to be released at a moment when a real-life event in Los Angeles had placed the policing of the city at the

⁴⁷ Romi Stepovich, '*Strange Days*: A Case History of Production and Distribution Practices in Hollywood', in Deborah Jermyn and Sean Redmond (eds.), *The Cinema of Katherine Bigelow: Hollywood Transgressor* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2003), p. 157.

⁴⁸ A search for 'Simpson trial' in the *Los Angeles Times* on-line archive reveals that, between 7 and 15 October 1995, the newspaper printed two hundred and thirty-six articles relating to the trial and its implications. Found at <<http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/latimes/search.html>> on 27 May 2009.

centre of public attention. As noted in Chapter IV of this thesis, *Colors* had opened a few days after the launch of Operation Hammer and *Boyz N the Hood* had premièred in the same week that the Christopher Commission had published its report into the King beating. In each case a fortunate coincidence of subject matter and timing had resulted in a huge amount of media attention, in packed houses for the opening weekend and in the film being at the centre of local discourses of law enforcement. In both the screenplay of *Boyz N the Hood* and in his public comments, John Singleton had been openly hostile towards the L.A.P.D. but, in the wake of the King beating, his views were closely aligned with prevailing public sentiments and with many of Warren Christopher's criticisms of the police. His film's commercial and critical success, which included an ability to attract audiences of all racial groups, indicated its success in 'tapping the *zeitgeist*'. Unlike *Boyz N the Hood*, which had been written, filmed and released within less than three years, *Strange Days* had endured an unusually long gestation period.⁴⁹ Its script had been developed intermittently over a period of at least ten years and was eventually finalised in 1993, almost two years before its release date.⁵⁰ By October 1995, its representations of policing in the city were out of date and its perspectives on race and spatiality were distinctly at variance with the dominant strands of civil discourse.

The plot of *Strange Days* relies heavily upon science-fiction, in the form of the Superconducting Quantum Interference Device (SQUID). Developed by the federal government, the key hardware component of this futuristic surveillance device is an electronic skull-cap which sits loosely on the head of the observer and is easily concealed by a wig, cap or headscarf. A wireless link to a nearby recorder then allows the complete

⁴⁹ Singleton wrote the original script in 1990 as his Senior Thesis.

⁵⁰ Stepovich, '*Strange Days*', pp. 150-51.

sensory experience of the wearer to be recorded directly from the cerebral cortex to a disc. The same equipment can be used for play-back via the optic nerve, allowing any SQUID wearer to re-live the experience, a sensation which Bigelow conveyed by shooting the SQUID sequences with a ‘steadicam’, a device often attached directly to the head of her actors which provided an individual point of view with a *cinema vérité* feel.⁵¹ Although SQUID is not legally available for commercial or recreational purposes, a black-market has developed and the illicit use of the technology enables the central story-line of *Strange Days* and provokes a defining moment in the relationship of its principal characters.

Jeriko One (Glenn Plummer), an African American rap musician and political activist, is a highly vocal advocate for the rights of the black community and a fierce critic of the L.A.P.D. as agents of white oppression. Late one night, while driving through Los Angeles in the company of another black male and two white women, he is pulled over by Officers Steckler (Vincent D’Onofrio) and Engleman (William Fichter). The patrolmen become aware of Jeriko One’s identity through an exchange of insults which culminates in his execution by a shot to the head from Steckler. Although they then begin to eliminate the witnesses, one of the passengers, a prostitute named Iris, manages to escape. Through later exposition, we learn that Jeriko One’s manager, Philo Gant (Michael Wincott), had suspected him of secretly negotiating with another record producer and had paid Iris to keep him under observation by wearing a SQUID device. The resultant recording, originally intended as commercial espionage, has now acquired the power to incriminate the police and to inflame the African American community. On the run and fearing for her

⁵¹ Kathryn Bigelow, director’s commentary in Special Features section of the Lightstorm Entertainment DVD *Strange Days* (1995).

life, Iris manages to give the disc to Lenny Nero (Ralph Fiennes) who, in turn, shares it with his close friend Lornette 'Mace' Mason (Angela Bassett).

Lenny, a former vice-cop who was fired by the L.A.P.D., has developed a business peddling 'clips', illicit SQUID recordings which mostly involve sexual fantasies. He clings pathetically to hopes of reviving his romantic relationship with Faith (Juliette Lewis), an ex-hooker and a friend of Iris who dreams of becoming a rock-star and has deserted Lenny to live with Philo Gant. Lenny's obsession with Faith dominates his actions until, in the final stages of the movie, he discovers that she has entered a murderous alliance with Max (Tom Sizemore), another ex-vice-cop who was once Lenny's partner and who has continued to pose as his friend. Mace Mason, an African American single mother who works as a professional security guard and chauffeur, first met Lenny as an L.A.P.D officer involved in the arrest and imprisonment of her ex-husband. The kindness and consideration which he showed to her young son caused Mace to fall in love with Lenny, but his pursuit of Faith makes him blind to her emotions until the end of the movie. Both characters recognise the importance of the disc but respond quite differently to its shocking revelations. While Lenny believes that Faith is somehow involved and wants to offer the disc to Gant in exchange for her safety, Mace immediately recognises the political and social significance of the recording. Describing it as 'a lightning-bolt from God' which has the power 'to change things', she is determined to bring the police to justice and prepared to take the risk that a public airing of its contents may lead to bloodshed. The strength of her convictions is such that Lenny eventually abandons the idea of using the disc to bargain with Gant and hands it to Mace. In the climactic events of Millennium Eve, she survives an attack from the police officers who killed Jeriko One and hands the disc to the Commissioner of Police.

Against a backdrop of authoritarian and military images of the L.A.P.D., Bigelow followed familiar contemporary cinematic practice by using rap as a medium of African American dissent although, unlike many other directors, she opted to cast an established actor, rather than a rap musician in the key role of Jeriko One. In an early scene, as part of a television news report of his murder, the rapper is shown in a music video condemning the American dream as a nightmare for black Americans, while newsreel footage of a political rally shows him berating the L.A.P.D. as ‘a military force, turned against its own people’ and claiming that ‘we live in a police state.’ These complaints are couched in language which is almost identical to that used by John Singleton when discussing representations of the L.A.P.D. in *Boyz N the Hood*, and are firmly rooted in the modern history of conflict between a predominantly white, para-military police force and the minority communities of Los Angeles.⁵² However, Singleton was speaking at a time when public approval ratings of an already embattled white police chief had plunged as a result of the Rodney King beating. By the time that *Strange Days* was released, not only had the experience of the riots made white Angelenos much less sympathetic to African American grievances but Chief Gates had been replaced by Chief Williams, an African American whose emphasis upon community policing had made the L.A.P.D. much less vulnerable to public criticism. Thus, by October 1995, although the memory of previous excesses remained, Jeriko One’s description of the L.A.P.D. as ‘an army of occupation’, while redolent of the early 1990s, was some way removed from contemporary perspectives.

Through the SQUID recording of the murder of Jeriko One by two white police officers, *Strange Days* provides its audience with a more melodramatic and less plausible fictional version of the Rodney King video-tape. King, a petty criminal with a history of

⁵² Goldstein, ‘His New Hood is Hollywood’, *Los Angeles Times*, 7 July 1991, p. 7.

arrests, was originally pursued because of concerns about his speed and, when treated for his injuries, was found to have high levels of alcohol and traces of marijuana in his system. When ordered to assume a prone position, he had insisted on rising to his feet and approaching the arresting officers who tried, without success, to stun him with a Taser and then used their batons to beat him into submission.⁵³ Since Jeriko One was driving normally and appeared to be sober, the audience is left to conclude that, in the eyes of the L.A.P.D., the presence of an African American man at the wheel of an expensive car was inherently suspicious, especially with white women as his passengers. Representations of apparently random stops of black motorists in both *Boyz N the Hood* and *Menace II Society* had portrayed a range of unacceptable behaviour on the part of L.A.P.D. officers, including racial insults, threats and a vicious beating. However, in *Strange Days*, a confrontation which initially seems to be little more than a Los Angeles motoring cliché rapidly develops into a multiple homicide with potentially explosive implications.

The police approach Jeriko One's car with guns drawn and order him to kneel in the road with hands clasped behind his neck.⁵⁴ Unlike Rodney King, he complies with these physical instructions but then immediately launches a furious verbal assault on the arresting officers, describing them as 'sorry-ass, Aryan, RoboCop motherfuckers', and himself as the 'eight-hundred pound gorilla in their mist'. In this last phrase, Jeriko One is accusing the cinematic officers of racism by re-cycling some of the real-life L.A.P.D.'s most infamous words. In the aftermath of the King beating, an investigation of patrol-car computer

⁵³ Taser is an acronym for a Thomas A. Swift Electric Rifle, a device designed to incapacitate suspects with an electrical charge. See Cannon, *Official Negligence*, p. 26.

⁵⁴ Randy Walker, interviewed by Robert Bevan, Los Angeles, 20 September 2008. Walker, an L.A.P.D. veteran who is credited as a technical adviser on *Strange Days*, confirms that the way in which the officers approach the vehicle reflects standard L.A.P.D. procedure for a traffic stop at night in many areas of Los Angeles.

messages by the Christopher Commission had revealed a pattern of remarks which implied a casual acceptance of brutality and racism, with Lawrence Powell, one of the four officers charged, providing the most quoted reference. In a message transmitted on the day before the King affair, Powell had described a domestic disturbance involving African Americans as ‘right out of *Gorillas In The Mist*.’⁵⁵ Finally, and fatally, Jeriko One flaunts his celebrity by warning Steckler that he is dealing with ‘a nigger with enough political juice to squash his ass like a stink-bug.’

As the movie nears its conclusion, the confrontation between Rodney King and the L.A.P.D. is revisited, thematically, through a stylised reconstruction in which a black woman replaces a black man as the subject of white male aggression. Learning that Mace has the disc in her possession, Steckler and Engleman manage to corner her among the crowds celebrating the Millennium. Mace uses her combat skills to overpower the killers, ironically subduing one officer with a Taser which she has taken from his colleague. However, after she has them in handcuffs, she is surrounded by a larger group of officers. Mace desperately tries to explain the situation but the officers, simply seeing an African American woman holding a gun over two fallen policemen, use multiple baton blows to force her to the ground, where she absorbs her punishment in a foetal position.

At their criminal trial, the officers charged with assaulting Rodney King had successfully claimed that their use of batons was justified by his continued resistance and was in line with L.A.P.D. policy. Following the death of James Mincey in 1982 and the subsequent restriction of the controversial choke hold to situations of mortal danger,

⁵⁵ Doug Linder, ‘The Trials of Los Angeles Police Officers’ in Connection with the Beating of Rodney King’ (2001), found at <<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/lapd/lapdaccount.html>> on 3 October 2007.

officers had come to depend upon use of the baton as the only alternative to firearms as a means of subduing suspects who resisted arrest. Several observers, including Lou Cannon, have argued that the real responsibility for the violence inflicted upon King lay, not with the officers involved, but with the ‘Official Negligence’ of the senior officers and politicians who had endorsed a protocol which allowed beating with batons as a means of providing such control.⁵⁶ In the aftermath of the King beating, official statistics indicate two major changes in L.A.P.D. behavior: a steep decline in the number of arrests and, in those arrests where force was required, an even steeper reduction in the use of batons. Cannon has suggested that a combination of low morale and concern over the increased risk of accusations for improper use of force were the primary reasons for the lower annual arrest figures, which fell from over three hundred thousand in 1990 to less than two hundred thousand in 1994.⁵⁷ Over the same period, the number of incidents per year involving the use of batons reduced from five hundred to forty-three, with a corresponding increase in the use of pepper-spray to disable hostile suspects.⁵⁸ Thus, *Strange Days* provides a representation of an aspect of L.A.P.D. behaviour which, although serving as a vivid reminder of the King video-tape, was no longer an accurate reflection of police practice and had little relevance to contemporary discourses of law enforcement.

⁵⁶ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, p. 293.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 546.

⁶⁴ Merrick J. Bobb *et al*, *Five Years Later: A Report to the Los Angeles Police Commission on the Los Angeles Police Department’s Implementation of Independent Commission Recommendations*, May 1996, p. 7, found at <http://www.parc.info/client_files/Special%20Reports/2%20-%20Five%20Years%20Later%20-%20Christopher%20Commission.pdf> on 23 October 2009. In a brief scene in *Strange Days*, Mace uses pepper-spray to discourage the attentions of a guard-dog. However, there is no indication that Bigelow recognised its increased significance to the L.A.P.D.

In the shadow of the Simpson trial, *Strange Days* was greeted by a relatively muted reception in the media and an overwhelming lack of interest from its potential audience, which Twentieth Century Fox had defined as ‘the young, educated and affluent’, a demographic which was also predominantly white.⁵⁹ The *Los Angeles Times* reported that the film ‘bombed resoundingly’ on its opening weekend and quoted a suggestion from an industry executive that ‘the non-stop Simpson barrage on television’ had hampered the film’s advertising campaign.⁶⁰ In a detailed review of the history of the film’s production, Romi Stepovich has suggested that Twentieth-Century Fox’s marketing department were confused by the multiple genres contained within the film and failed to come up with a coherent promotional campaign for what she has described as a ‘science fiction, *film noir* action thriller’. However, Stepovich also joins several other critics in ascribing the film’s failure to the broader issue of the relationship between its story, its underlying politics and the environment in which it was released. She describes Los Angeles in the early 1990s as ‘a hotbed of racial tension’, with the L.A.P.D. at the centre of most controversy, and suggests that Simpson’s acquittal had raised the temperature even further. In her opinion, a film which included graphic images of violence in Los Angeles may not have been ‘what North America wanted to see at the time.’⁶¹ This point of view was put most succinctly by Sean O’Neill, writing in *Los Angeles View*. O’Neill argued that ‘in the race-splitting aftermath of O.J. Simpson’s trial ... the timing of its release is so wrong’ and pointed out that, at the time the film was planned ‘distrust and distaste for the LAPD ran high on both sides of the racial fence. Back then, everyone ... knew that Rodney King had been wronged

⁵⁹ Stepovich, ‘*Strange Days*’, p. 156.

⁶⁰ Claudia Puig and Richard Natale, ‘A scary time at box office’, *Los Angeles Times*, 20 October 1995, p. F1.

⁶¹ Stepovich, ‘*Strange Days*’, pp. 152-57.

and ... considered the LAPD to be the enemy.’ He went on to suggest that ‘in the aftermath of O.J.’s acquittal, white audiences will not likely be so sympathetic when they see Angela Bassett being beaten with nightsticks’.⁶²

Although *Strange Days* made only a minimal impact upon most channels of public debate, Kathryn Bigelow’s status as one of very few women directors in Hollywood and as a ‘feminist icon’ ensured that, at least in academic discourse, her film received a significant amount of attention.⁶³ Most scholars credit its director for the radical interpretation of racial politics in Los Angeles which permeates *Strange Days*, but differ in their opinions of the influence of her political stance on the commercial failure of the movie. Despina Kakoudaki believes that Bigelow’s approach carries some of the responsibility for the film’s disappointing box-office performance, arguing that: ‘By explicitly thematising the policemen’s beating of Rodney King ... and the urban violence that followed their acquittal, *Strange Days* undertakes to compose an allegory out of what most would consider a tragedy or a disaster.’ In Kakoudaki’s opinion, when films such as *Strange Days* ‘stage references to actual events of racial misunderstanding, the critique seems too insistent and inappropriate.’ She echoes Linda Williams and Ronald Jacobs in arguing that Los Angeles, in the aftermath of the Simpson trial, was characterised by ‘a racially specific divergence of view’ and claims that *Strange Days* falls into the category of those ‘films that posit a clear allegorical reading but fail to capture the public imagination’.⁶⁴ Mark Berrettini agrees with Kakoudaki that the dramatic impact of the film depends not only on the widely accepted

⁶² Sean O’ Neill, ‘Days Late’, *Los Angeles View*, 13-19 October 1995, found in *Strange Days Clippings File*, Margaret Herrick Library, no page reference provided.

⁶³ Deborah Jermyn and Sean Redmond, ‘Hollywood Transgressor: The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow’, in Jermyn and Redmond (eds.), *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow*, p. 5.

⁶⁴ Despina Kakoudaki, ‘Spectacles of History: Race Relations, Melodrama and the Science Fiction/Disaster Film’, *Camera Obscura*, 50 (vol. 17, no. 2), May 2002, pp. 113, 123-24, 126.

notion that the beating of Rodney King was a ‘racist and brutal attack’ but, more controversially, on the assumption that ‘the L.A. rebellion was a politicised social uprising in reaction to a racist and illegitimate verdict.’⁶⁵

One commentator who apparently finds this assumption to be convincing is Christina Lane. In her assessment of the ‘racial ideologies’ of *Strange Days*, Lane praises Bigelow for placing the Jeriko One execution and the struggle for the disc ‘in the context of a long-standing historical continuum of black resistance and civil rights activism’. She argues that, in the scene where Mace is beaten by the police, her body ‘becomes overdetermined with multiple image histories, including those of slavery, the 1968 [sic] Watts Riots and most obviously the LAPD’s brutality against Rodney King.’ Lane believes that Bigelow’s sensitivity to this historical context is also discernible in the way in which she ‘successfully codes’ the rioters in *Strange Days* as ‘energetic political agents’ rather than as the ‘random, self-serving individuals’ portrayed in the contemporary news coverage of what Lane describes as the 1992 ‘acts of resistance.’⁶⁶

Despite Lane’s fulsome praise, even she is unable to provide justification for the way in which the plot of *Strange Days* is developed and finally resolved. Whereas the King beating, however brutal, was carried out by police officers in an attempt to subdue a suspect who refused to follow instructions, the film suggests that a mere exchange of insults is sufficient motive for Officer Steckler to kill Jeriko One and then seek to murder the three witnesses to the crime. After using the rapper’s words to dramatise the troubled relationship between the L.A.P.D. and the African American community in the starkest possible terms,

⁶⁵ Mark Berrettini, ‘Can We All Get Along?: Social Differences, the Future and *Strange Days*’, *Camera Obscura*, 50 (vol. 17, no. 2), May 2002, p. 175.

⁶⁶ Christina Lane, ‘The *Strange Days* of Kathryn Bigelow and James Cameron’, in Jermyn and Redmond eds., *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow*, pp. 195-96.

Bigelow has described his execution as ‘a random, freak situation perpetrated by two individuals ... acting completely outside any authority.’⁶⁷ *Strange Days* thus isolates responsibility for the elimination of an African American celebrity, who was also a leading critic of the L.A.P.D., to two ‘loose cannon’ cops who are themselves conveniently killed-off before the potential embarrassment of a trial. Then, only a few moments after a beating by baton-wielding L.A.P.D. officers, its African American heroine is happy to entrust the crucial disc to a senior white officer of the same force, primarily because she has been assured that he is ‘one cop who’s not dirty.’ Although in an earlier scene Mace had expressed her willingness to risk the potential disorder which a public broadcast of the disc might bring in order to see justice done, her action in handing the disc to Commissioner Strickland, a stereotypical white patriarch, is the filmic equivalent of George Holliday handing his videotape to Daryl Gates. Even Chief Gates’ most hostile detractors had never accused him of being ‘dirty’ but, without the passions aroused by the public broadcasting of the videotape, his track-record suggests that he would have preferred to handle the Rodney King ‘aberration’ through internal disciplinary procedures. Although only four officers were charged over the beating of Rodney King, the power of the videotape and the public outrage which it generated were sufficient to force the L.A.P.D. to submit to the scrutiny of Warren Christopher’s powerful independent commission. In the words of Despina Kakoudaki, the conclusion of *Strange Days* means that the murder of Jeriko One ‘thus remains a politically invisible act.’⁶⁸

Kathryn Bigelow’s own public comments make it clear that her ambitions for *Strange Days* went beyond the normal criteria of commercial success and critical acclaim.

⁶⁷ Veronica Webb, ‘Big, bad Bigelow’, interview November 1995, found at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1285/is_n11_v25/ai_17632982/ on 25 May 2009.

⁶⁸ Kakoudaki, ‘Spectacles of History’, p. 126.

In interviews with cinematic journals both before and after the film's opening, she emphasised the influence of the Rodney King affair and its consequences in her approach to the film. As she told *Cinefantastique*, when she was first introduced to an outline script, 'the Los Angeles riots had just taken place and, since the setting was L.A., the politics became very important to me.'⁶⁹ In another interview, published in *Empire*, she described her wish to make the film 'into a political commentary about the environment in which it was set', and described it as 'a movie that certainly tries to address our socio-political landscape with a modicum of truth.'⁷⁰ In her opinion, the street scenes in *Strange Days* depicted 'a flashpoint society maybe on the brink of civil war' a situation which would not be 'an incredible stretch of the imagination' to anyone who had been in Los Angeles at the time of the riots.⁷¹

Bigelow's vision of the city in *Strange Days* adds to the many Hollywood representations which have associated its streets with danger. Eric Avila has described Los Angeles as a favoured site for 'collective fantasies of urban despair', noting that it served as the location for many *noir* classics such as *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *The Big Sleep* (1953), and more recently as the home of historical *noir* in *Chinatown* (1974), *Devil In A Blue Dress* (1995) and *LA Confidential*, and of sci-fi *noir* in *Blade Runner* (1981).⁷² Both *Strange Days* and its more famous predecessor portray a future Los Angeles as urban dystopia but, while *Blade Runner* showed a city drenched in acid rain, the imagery of *Strange Days* is powerfully evocative of the 1992 riots. The streets are the scene of violence and mayhem, and appear to be populated predominantly by people of colour

⁶⁹ Alan Jones, 'Strange Days', *Cinefantastique*, no. 82, 1 April, pp. 52-53.

⁷⁰ Ian Nathan, 'No Retreat, No Surrender', *Empire*, vol. 27, no. 9, 1 May 1996, p. 78.

⁷¹ Gavin Smith, 'Momentum and Design', *Film Comment*, vol. 31, no. 5, 1 September 1995, p. 48.

⁷² Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, pp. 237-38.

belonging to low income groups. Abandoned cars burn while random acts of violence proliferate, leaving the impression of what Janet Maslin has described as ‘a smoking, rubble-strewn crime scene’.⁷³ In the words of Kenneth James Fox, as Lenny and Mace drive across the city ‘the riots/uprising of 1992 could still be taking place.’⁷⁴ The role of the National Guard in restoring order during those disturbances is invoked by highly visible military forces and equipment, while the presence of Korean shop-keepers serves as a reminder that Korea Town was the site of some of the most intensive and damaging incidents. Armed police are everywhere and roadblocks requiring identity checks are common. Nevertheless, entire areas of the city appear to be lawless, implying that the police are content to ignore violence in certain public areas and providing echoes of the lack of purposeful police intervention when the violence erupted in South Central Los Angeles, at the junction of Florence and Normandie.

Despite acknowledging the influence of these events on Bigelow’s apocalyptic vision of the city, Liam Kennedy has suggested that she is also indebted to Mike Davis who, as early as 1990, had identified signs of ‘approaching helter-skelter’, as a whole generation in Los Angeles was ‘being shunted towards some impossible Armageddon.’ Kennedy argues that, in *Strange Days*, Bigelow creates an exaggerated version of the ‘climate of fear’ which Davis attributed to the ‘spatial paranoia’ of the city in the Seventies and Eighties. Davis argued that, in ‘Fortress L.A.’, the political and economic power of the white middle class had influenced architects and planners to support spatial segregation and that the consequent destruction of public space and amenities had created an urban culture

⁷³ Janet Maslin, ‘Film Festival Review: New, Improved Virtual Reality, 1999’, *New York Times*, 6 October 1995, p. C20.

⁷⁴ Fox, *Cinematic Visions of Los Angeles*, p. 136.

of avoidance and denial.⁷⁵ He directed a particularly scathing attack towards the downtown business district where, in the wake of the Watts riot, the business community had made spatial security a leading concern and had removed direct pedestrian access from the surrounding immigrant areas.⁷⁶

Davis' description of a city divided between the 'fortified cells' of affluent society and 'places of terror where the police battle the criminalised poor' finds its echoes in the street scenes in *Strange Days*, especially in the contrast between the opulence of the Bonaventure Hotel and the chaos in the surrounding streets.⁷⁷ Although there are obvious similarities between the chaotic spatiality of *Strange Days* and the perspectives provided both by the words of Davis and by television coverage of the riots, there is also a significant point of difference. In 1992, although the fire and destruction had a broader footprint than in the Watts riot of 1965, the overwhelming majority of damage and looting occurred in African American and Latino areas of the inner city, on the same streets which had provided the gritty backdrop to films such as *Colors*, *Boyz N the Hood* and *Menace II Society*. However, in *Strange Days*, Bigelow engineers a reversal of the normal, racially dominated perspective of space. While the streets in public areas generally associated with wealth and whiteness are filled by disorderly multi-racial crowds, Bigelow's camera finds civic harmony in the racially homogeneous African American neighbourhood where Mace

⁷⁵ Kennedy, *Race and Urban Space in Contemporary American Culture*, p.42, citing Davis, *City of Quartz*, pp. 316, 224.

⁷⁶ Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 239. Despite Davis' criticisms, these forms of architectural security justified themselves in 1992, when the rioters failed to make any significant impact in downtown Los Angeles.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 224 and n.1, p. 260. In this passage, Davis is using phrases from the 1969 report of the National Committee on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. The Bonaventure, which is often referenced as an example of postmodern architecture, has featured in many movies, including *Blue Thunder*, *Rain Man* (1989), *In The Line Of Fire* (1993) and *True Lies* (1994).

and Lenny seek refuge from their pursuers. In this haven of family and community, after some initial suspicion, even a white ex-cop like Lennie can apparently find sanctuary.

The influence of Mike Davis can also be identified in another aspect of *Strange Days* which, although less controversial than Rodney King and the riots, was of more contemporary relevance to daily life in Los Angeles. Jeriko One's reference to *RoboCop* (1987), carries echoes of a sub-chapter in *City of Quartz*, entitled 'From Rentacop to RoboCop', in which Davis compared the sinister influence of a private security company in Paul Verhoeven's film to the exponential growth of that industry in Los Angeles. *Strange Days* underlines the increasing significance of private companies in law enforcement through the character of Mace, a 'bonded security specialist' who operates as a bodyguard and chauffeur. Mace is armed and dangerous and, in her spare time, uses her expertise to act as Lenny's protector. Her nickname provides references both to an ancient weapon and to a form of tear-gas, and implies a willingness to use forcible means to defend herself or her clients. She is strong, skilled in physical combat and in the use of firearms and, as an expert driver of her bullet-proof limousine, represents an exaggerated version of an elite professional in a business with an increasingly important role in local law enforcement. During the 1980s and early 1990s, while reduced public funding had kept L.A.P.D. headcount within a range of approximately seven thousand to nine thousand officers, Davis estimates that the numbers employed in private security throughout Los Angeles County had more than tripled from twenty-four thousand to seventy-five thousand. Although, unlike Mace, the majority of employees were minimum-wage minority males, their

employers were ‘multi-national conglomerates offering a dazzling range of security ... services’.⁷⁸

In 1993, Miles Corwin, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, cited a National Institute of Justice study which estimated that the numbers employed in the industry had doubled in the previous ten years to six hundred thousand, making private security ‘one of the fastest growing fields in the country’. The same study indicated a qualitative change in the industry, claiming that: ‘Private security forces have evolved to the point that they now routinely perform some of the tasks traditionally performed by law enforcement such as guard, patrol and investigative services.’ Corwin quoted ‘an industry insider’ who emphasised the changing nature of the role: ‘In a hard-core high-crime neighborhood you can't send in the old unarmed night watchman types. They'd get eaten alive. We send in teams of very aggressive armed guards who will butt heads until a place is cleaned up.’ The article also gave an insight into the spatial and racial politics of law enforcement through the views of Mark Baldassare, a professor of urban planning at the University of California, Irvine, who claimed that: ‘not everyone in the city has equal protection. So in the poorer neighborhoods, residents feel more vulnerable, more abandoned by the system. And the only people who really feel safe are those who can pay for protection. You see this same type of thing in Third World cities ... and it looks like it's evolving that way in L.A.’⁷⁹ Lou Cannon has argued that, in the aftermath of the 1992 riots, the fears of African American communities, coupled with their relatively low levels of income, led them to support a proposed city-tax increase to fund Riordan's plan for more patrol officers. In wealthy white

⁷⁸ Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 250.

⁷⁹ Miles Corwin, ‘Guns for Hire: A Growing Crop of Private Cops Is the First Line of Defense for Our Homes and Shops-but at a Price’, *Los Angeles Times*, 28 November 1993, p. 24.

areas of the city, where the private security industry was booming, the same voters who had elected Riordan rejected the tax increase.⁸⁰ Even in pre-riot Los Angeles, Davis had noted the ubiquity of warning signs in affluent, mostly white, housing areas which promised ‘Armed Response’, a phrase which he suggested as an unofficial motto for the city.⁸¹

Unfortunately for Kathryn Bigelow, both her subject-matter and her obvious sympathy with those who took to the streets in 1992 contributed to the film’s dismal commercial performance and ensured that its contribution to civil discourse was largely confined to academic circles. In Los Angeles in October 1995, the shared sense of outrage generated by the King videotape seemed to be a distant memory. For the white community, the fears for life and property generated by the 1992 riots, which had contributed to the ‘white backlash’ of 1993, had now been exacerbated by a feeling of outrage over the Simpson verdict. For African Americans, the anger which had been ignited by the acknowledged racism of Mark Fuhrman had been partially assuaged by the jubilation which followed Simpson’s acquittal and by the reassuring presence of a black Chief who was an advocate of community policing. By October 1995, the Simpson trial had been the focus of extensive media coverage for almost a year and its racially polarising verdict continued to dominate discourses of law enforcement. In this environment, Bigelow’s filmic discourse, which postulated a future involving radical African American politics, military-style policing, out-of-control white racist cops and apparently endemic disorder on the streets, was largely disconnected from prevailing public sentiments, especially those of the white population who formed the majority of her potential audience. At the conclusion of *Strange Days*, Mace’s improbable act of trust in handing the disc to the Police Commissioner is

⁸⁰ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, p. 532.

⁸¹ Davis, *City of Quartz*, p. 250.

followed by a lingering, passionate kiss between herself and Lenny, an apparent attempt by Bigelow to provide a message of hope, which Liam Kennedy has described as ‘a vision of a new dawn for race relations’ based upon ‘redemptive love’.⁸² Even in 1995, a happy ending involving miscegenation was unusual for a Hollywood movie and, in the aftermath of the Simpson trial, as a metaphor for the future of Los Angeles, it seemed hopelessly optimistic.

⁸² Kennedy, *Race and Urban Space in Contemporary American Culture*, p. 43.

3. *L.A. Confidential* (1997)

This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.

Maxwell Scott (Carleton Young) in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962).⁸³

This famous line, from an iconic Western, could also serve as a *leitmotif* for *L.A. Confidential*, a movie which reveals the dark underside of Los Angeles law enforcement in the Fifties while underlining the efforts which the L.A.P.D. devoted to creating a favourable public perception through the media. By the time of its release, in September 1997, cinema audiences in Los Angeles and the rest of the world had been saturated with negative images of the L.A.P.D. on their television screens and in their newspapers. The King beating, the 1992 riots and the trial of O.J. Simpson had ensured that the conduct and governance of the police had featured prominently in both national and local political debate for several years and, in this febrile environment, it was no surprise that a number of movies should emerge which provided various unflattering views of the force. Although most of these films had a contemporary setting, three were set in the 1950s and provided, for the first time, a retrospective examination of a period when the L.A.P.D. had devoted considerable resources to the task of cultivating its image as the self-proclaimed ‘best police force in the world’, an image most famously represented through Jack Webb’s *Dragnet* franchise. *Devil In A Blue Dress*, an adaptation of Walter Mosley’s novel, gave an African American perspective on police racism and brutality through the eyes of a part-time private investigator, while *Mulholland Falls* (1996) revealed the illegal methods used by a specialised detective squad in their pursuit of organised crime associates. Although each of these films, in its own way, served to subvert traditional 1950s representations of a

⁸³ The relevance of these words to *L.A. Confidential* was originally suggested in Donald Lyons, ‘The bad and the beautiful: *L.A. Confidential*’, *Film Comment* vol. 33, no. 6, 1 November 1997, p. 15.

disciplined force of honourable men, scrupulously observing the law, it was *L.A.*

Confidential which finally exploded the *Dragnet* myth with a compelling story of police racism, brutality and corruption in a narrative which included an important role for a thinly disguised version of the *Dragnet* television series itself.

Jack Webb's desire for authenticity made *Dragnet* dependent upon Chief Parker's goodwill for technical support and for a supply of suitable stories, a dependency which Parker exploited to ensure that the show became an important vehicle for publicising the L.A.P.D.'s claims to excellence and that only a heavily sanitised version of the policing of Los Angeles was available to television and cinema audiences.⁸⁴ Such contrasts between appearance and reality are apparent from the outset in *L.A. Confidential*, a film in which, as Manohla Dhargis has remarked, 'no one and nothing are what they first seem.'⁸⁵ Its documentary-style opening sequence splices together all the attractions of Los Angeles in the 1950s: plentiful employment and affordable housing in a city of sunshine, palm trees, beaches, orange groves and movie stars. Yet what appears to be a cinematic version of the 'boosterism' often associated with the city, in an era characterised by relentless expansion of the freeway network and by 'white flight' to the rapidly developing suburbs, is accompanied by a sardonic voice-over provided by Sid Hudgens (Danny De Vito), the editor of the celebrity-scandal magazine, *Hush Hush*.⁸⁶

Life is good in Los Angeles. It's paradise on earth. That's what they tell you because they're selling an image, they're selling it through movies, radio and television. In the hit show *Badge Of Honor*, the L.A. cops walk on water as they keep the city clean of crooks. You'd think this place was the Garden of Eden. But there's trouble in paradise ... Because how can organised crime exist in the city with the best police force in the world?

⁸⁴ Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, pp. 124-25.

⁸⁵ Manohla Dargis, *L.A. Confidential* (British Film Institute, 2003), p. 13.

⁸⁶ See Davis, *City of Quartz*; Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*; Klein, *The History of Forgetting*.

Hudgens' words and, just as importantly, his tone of voice, prepare the cinema audience for an exposé of the sordid underside of the city, in a film which reveals the deceptions and perversions within its various power structures: civic government, the business community, the Hollywood studios and, especially, the L.A.P.D.⁸⁷ Within the story of *L.A. Confidential*, the significance of the media to perceptions of law enforcement is reinforced at a number of levels. At two crucial stages the plot hinges upon the Chief's desire to protect his political position from adverse publicity and, throughout the film, the regular references to *Badge Of Honor*, not only illustrate the importance which the L.A.P.D. placed on television as a means of boosting its public image, but also serve as an ironic contrast to the actions of the police force which the programme supposedly represents.

The early scenes, which introduce its three main protagonists, make it obvious that, despite the 1950s setting, this film will be nothing like *Dragnet*. On Christmas Eve, at the scene of a domestic incident, Detective Bud White (Russell Crowe) introduces himself as a violent vigilante by assaulting a wife-beater and is then shown persuading a liquor-store owner to provide him with large amounts of free alcohol for the Christmas party at Hollywood Station. At that same location, Sergeant Ed Exley (Guy Pearce), an ambitious young uniformed officer who has just finished in first place in the Lieutenants' examination, tries to persuade Captain of Detectives, Dudley Smith (James Cromwell), that he should be given his promotion in the Detective Bureau. Their conversation makes it clear that, in the L.A.P.D. of the time, securing convictions justifies regular transgression of legal boundaries, including murder:

Smith: Edmund, you're a political animal. You have the eye for human weakness, but not the stomach.

⁸⁷ Fox, *Cinematic Visions of Los Angeles*, p. 91.

Exley: You're wrong, sir.

Smith: Would you be willing to plant corroborative evidence on a suspect you knew to be guilty, in order to ensure an indictment?

Exley: Dudley, we've been over this.

Smith: Yes or no, Edmund?

Exley: No!

Smith: Would you be willing to beat a confession out of a suspect you knew to be guilty?

Exley: No.

Smith: Would you be willing to shoot a hardened criminal in the back, in order to offset the chance that some... lawyer...

Exley: No.

Smith: Then, for the love of God, don't be a detective.

This clash between Exley's idealism and Smith's brutal realism establishes a dramatic tension which persists throughout the movie and which is finally resolved by a plot-twist which also underlines the future importance of news management for the L.A.P.D. Meanwhile, Detective Sergeant Jack Vincennes (Kevin Spacey), the technical advisor to *Badge Of Honor*, is mingling with the stars of the show at their Christmas party and using the occasion to arrange a pay-off from *Hush Hush* for a 'celebrity pot-bust'. This ironic juxtaposition of a corrupt cop acting as L.A.P.D. liaison to a television show which provides an idealised portrait of the police receives an overt, if playful recognition in a flirtatious exchange between Vincennes and his dancing partner:

Karen: What exactly do you do for *Badge Of Honor*?

Vincennes: I'm the technical advisor. I teach Brett Chase how to walk and talk like a cop.

Karen: Brett Chase doesn't walk and talk like you.

Vincennes: Well, that's because he's the television version. America isn't ready for the real me.

In the Fifties, the Hollywood studios and the American television networks were certainly not ready to screen widespread corruption, brutality and racism on the part of the police but, in 1996, when Curtis Hanson began filming his adaptation of James Ellroy's novel, no such constraints remained. Instead, he was able to operate in a cinematic

environment which was virtually free from censorship and, perhaps more significantly, one in which his potential audiences had been exposed, on television and in newspapers, to real-life episodes in the history of the L.A.P.D. which were as dramatic as anything the cinema could provide. A film made without the constraints of the Production Code and outside the influence of the L.A.P.D. gave a Nineties audience a perspective on Fifties policing which was dramatically different from that which had been on display in the films of that era and which provided an historical context for issues of contemporary relevance. Brett Chase, the TV cop in *Badge Of Honor*, may have continued to 'walk on water' but the main protagonists of *L.A. Confidential* were mired in a swamp of corruption, racism and brutality. Their story hinges on two key events, each of which involves L.A.P.D. violence directed towards minority suspects and each of which provides a Nineties audience with direct links to matters of contemporary concern. Although the story of *L.A. Confidential* is centred upon a wholly fictional murder case, the fates of White, Exley and Vincennes first become entwined through their involvement in the film's dramatic interpretation of a real-life event which had far-reaching consequences for the L.A.P.D. and for the city which it served.

Within a long history of racially charged clashes between the police and the minority communities of Los Angeles, one such incident remains notable both for its brutality and for its long-term influence on the operating philosophy of the L.A.P.D. On Christmas Eve 1951, a disturbance at a bar resulted in the forcible arrest of seven Latinos who were subsequently held in custody at Central Station. In the early hours of Christmas Day, a station party was in full swing when wildly inaccurate rumours began to circulate of serious injuries sustained by the arresting officers. The celebrations then turned sour as a large number of policemen, fuelled by alcohol and by a desire for revenge, invaded the

cells and assaulted the prisoners. After some first-aid, the prisoners were then transported to the City Jail, which was also run by the L.A.P.D., only to suffer further beatings from their jailers.⁸⁸ Although the injuries were severe, the assaults went unreported at the time and it was not until three months later, when the Latinos themselves came to trial, that their accusations of police brutality became public. The trial judge was sufficiently convinced by the evidence to order a Grand Jury investigation into what became known as ‘Bloody Christmas’, an incident described by *La Opinión* as ‘an orgy of blood’ where officers were heard screaming as they beat their victims.⁸⁹

More than forty years later, former Chief Daryl Gates considered the event sufficiently important to allow him to draw parallels between the Grand Jury proceedings of 1952 and the 1992 report of the Christopher Commission which had ended the political independence of the Chief of Police and had led to his own eventual resignation. Gates followed the L.A.P.D. party-line from the 1950s in asserting that Parker had gone after the officers involved ‘tooth and nail’, quoting as evidence an extract from a *Los Angeles Times* article which had identified: ‘Definite and remedial action by Police Chief Parker so that citizens of Los Angeles will be secure in their persons and their rights properly protected.’ However, he neglected to quote other sentences in the same article which were rather more critical of his famous mentor: ‘the police department functions for the benefit of the public and not as a fraternal organisation for the benefit of fellow officers ... The Chief of Police cannot brush aside his responsibility by placing all the blame on subordinates’.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ ‘8 Police Indicted In Beating Case’, the *Los Angeles Times*, 23 April 1952, pp. 1, 22.

⁸⁹ ‘Escenas de horror en la ‘Navidad Sangrienta’: Informe del Gran Jurado revela cómo los policías resbalaban en la sangre.’, *La Opinión* 14 May 1952, pp. 1, 8.

⁹⁰ Gates and Shah, *Chief*, pp. 42-43 quoting from ‘Grand Jury Raps Police for Brutality’, *Los Angeles Times*, 30 April 1952, p. 1.

Although several histories of the L.A.P.D. make brief reference to Bloody Christmas and recognise its importance in the development of the modern force, by far the most comprehensive account of the incident has been provided by Edward J. Escobar who has described its significance within the context both of contemporary Chicano politics and of Chief Parker's role as the architect of the modern L.A.P.D. Parker was a leading proponent of the professional model of policing, to which Escobar attributes two significant characteristics: a 'war-on-crime' mentality and a desire to operate without civilian supervision or, as Parker described it without 'political interference'. Although responsibility for passing laws remained with elected officials, professionalisation demanded that it was for the police to decide how these laws would be enforced and whether or not actions on the part of police officers justified disciplinary action.⁹¹ As previously noted, Parker's re-negotiations of Section 202 of the city charter in the 1930s had allowed the L.A.P.D. to operate in this fashion, while effectively bestowing life tenure upon its Chief, an advantage which he and his successors enjoyed for more than four decades.

The cinematic version of Bloody Christmas not only plays a pivotal role in *L.A. Confidential*'s plot development but, equally importantly, sets the tone for the remainder of the movie by establishing an environment in which vigilante justice is apparently commonplace and in which racial minorities can be mistreated with relative impunity. For White, Vincennes and Exley, the events which take place in the early hours of Christmas Day serve to link their individual destinies. When the Latinos are brought into the station,

⁹¹ Escobar, 'Bloody Christmas and the Irony of Police Professionalism', pp. 176-77. Throughout his essay, Escobar uses 'Chicano' to describe an American of Mexican descent. Elsewhere in this thesis I have used the more generic term 'Latino' to indicate anyone with ethnic roots in Mexico or in Central or South America.

Vincennes decides that some black humour is in order and loudly suggests that one of the arresting officers has lost several pints of blood and that another is in a coma. Despite Exley's protests that, in fact, the injuries sustained were only minor, the rumour takes hold. A large group of detectives and uniformed officers, led by White's partner Stensland, decide that revenge is in order and, emboldened by drink, they invade the cells and beat the prisoners. Exley, a slight, bespectacled figure who is serving as watch commander for the night, is unable to control events and is overpowered and locked in a storage cupboard, while White and Vincennes both become involved in the assault. In the aftermath, Exley confirms his reputation as a 'political animal' by exploiting the scandal to secure his promotion to detective while Stensland faces prosecution and Vincennes and White are both subject to disciplinary action.

The action shown on screen and the attitudes of the officers involved is essentially consistent with Escobar's scholarly interpretation of the incident. Identifying the violent reaction of the L.A.P.D. towards young Mexican Americans in the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943 as a direct antecedent of Bloody Christmas, Escobar argues that, in general, the war-on-crime mentality encouraged officers to adopt a 'no-holds barred' approach to lawbreakers, while, in Los Angeles in particular, its linkage between race and criminality further encouraged 'jail-house justice' and the sense that it would go unpunished. In his opinion, an 'excessive sense of occupational identity and fraternalism' meant that officers placed loyalty to their colleagues and to the department above the rights of their prisoners, a perspective which allows him to argue that professionalisation itself was a causal influence in Bloody Christmas. Ironically enough, coming at an early stage in the new chief's period in office, the consequences of this particular affray also posed a serious threat to his political independence. In the aftermath of Bloody Christmas, Parker came under attack on

a number of fronts, with the affair generating numerous banner headlines in the local press.⁹² While Grand Jury deliberations continued, several local political associations and at least one major local newspaper coupled the beatings with other recent instances of police brutality against Chicanos. They demanded the repeal of Section 202 of the City Charter and called for the Police Commission to investigate the powers and operations of the L.A.P.D.'s Internal Affairs Division. In the face of legal and political pressure, Parker mounted what Escobar describes as a masterly campaign of damage limitation. Although he was reluctantly obliged to support the work of the Grand Jury, in an attempt to constrain its scope to the incident itself, he launched an apparently extensive internal enquiry which led to disciplinary action against more than forty officers, generally in the form of temporary suspensions without pay. However, he also threw his personal support behind those officers who, with a suspiciously convenient loss of memory, claimed to be unable to recall the events clearly, and publicly discredited his political critics as supporters of civil unrest who were undermining the authority of the police. Parker claimed that 'fast money boys', by which he meant organised crime associates, were attempting to use the allegations of brutality to engineer his dismissal, and argued that, in a violent society 'sometimes the police have to use violence to protect the public'.⁹³

The Grand Jury eventually investigated more than fifty officers, of whom only eight were charged and five convicted of any wrongdoing. Its final report played into Parker's hands by focussing upon the relatively narrow issues of the night in question and

⁹² A review of L.A.P.D. Scrapbooks for the relevant period shows the following headlines: 'POLICE BRUTALITY CHARGES STIR L.A', *Daily News*, 26 February 1952.; 'BRUTALITY QUIZ DUCKED BY CHIEF', *Daily News*, 28 February 1952; 'Secret Police Brutality Charge Made By FBI', *Citizen News*, 14 March 1952; '50 LA Police Implicated in Bloody Beatings', *Los Angeles Mirror*, 14 March 1952.

⁹³ Escobar, 'Bloody Christmas and the Irony of Police Professionalism', p. 190.

by making no mention of police governance or of wider allegations of police brutality. As Escobar points out, the predominantly white local political establishment felt able to ignore the torrent of negative publicity which Bloody Christmas had generated and, by choosing to place order and stability above the rule of law, demonstrated their support for Parker's concept of an aggressive, independent L.A.P.D.⁹⁴

Although *L.A. Confidential* lacks any reference to the Chicano activism which created much of the pressure on Chief Parker, its audience is left in no doubt that Bloody Christmas posed a serious political challenge to the filmic Chief. As noted in Chapter I, in an entirely fictional dramatic device which was not present in Ellroy's novel, a journalist and his photographer visit the station on Christmas Eve to gather material for 'Silent Night With The L.A.P.D.', a pro-police publicity article. The assault on the prisoners presents them with an unexpected scoop and, in an obvious reference to the Rodney King videotape, the following day's newspapers are dominated by photographic evidence of police brutality. Prompted by Exley's self-serving analysis of the situation and supported by the District Attorney, the cinematic Chief handles the crisis much as Parker did. Recognising that Bloody Christmas is 'not exactly the image of the new L.A.P.D. we're trying to create', and faced with a Grand Jury, he seeks the testimony of 'police witnesses to offset the damage'. Although White refuses to co-operate and is suspended, Exley is not only willing to risk the scorn of his colleagues by testifying before the Grand Jury but also suggests to the Chief a strategy designed to outflank public criticism by demonstrating that the L.A.P.D. themselves are taking a hard line against the culprits. He recommends that the Chief should prosecute White and Stensland and then 'shift the guilt to men whose pensions are assured'. Needing corroboration, Exley suggests that Vincennes' reluctance to

⁹⁴ Escobar, 'Bloody Christmas', pp. 173, 190.

testify can be overcome by threatening him with the loss of his treasured affiliation with *Badge of Honour*. Vincennes is duly persuaded to give evidence, but assuages his conscience by restricting his testimony to officers who are already eligible for their pension: 'All I'll be doing is snitching three old-timers who'll be fishing in Oregon this time next week'. His punishments are both temporary: a transfer to the Vice Squad and suspension from his advisory post with *Badge Of Honour*. White's prosecution is dropped after several civilian witnesses change their testimony following what Smith knowingly describes as 'a change of heart'. Smith then offers White a 'muscle job' in Homicide, an opportunity which involves illegal use of violence to intimidate organised-crime associates. Exley, however, is now clearly the coming man and his promotion is secured as the Chief acknowledges that 'the department will need role models' and recognises in Exley an example of 'the clean-cut and forthright men the public will admire'.

In the film, as in real life, the Chief's skilful and ruthless management of the crisis cements the power of his office and illustrates the importance which the L.A.P.D. placed upon management of public opinion, including the use of representations such as *Dagnet*. Despite the absence of some political context and the insertion of some fictional plot-devices, the cinematic version of *Bloody Christmas* manages to capture the essence of the event and its consequences in a way which, in Robert Rosenstone's words, legitimately 'engages with the discourse of history'.⁹⁵ In doing so, it exemplifies the power of film to bring the past to life in a compelling fashion while providing an historical context for the relationship between the L.A.P.D. and minorities which had been at the root of the calamities of the 1990s. Shortly after *Bloody Christmas*, Parker introduced the powerful imagery of 'the thin blue line', which 'would become the L.A.P.D.'s central organising

⁹⁵ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, pp. 72-73.

metaphor for decades to come' and which, in Escobar's opinion, led the L.A.P.D. to see themselves as 'the self-proclaimed guardians of civilisation' whose critics therefore 'could only be the forces of barbarism.' He argues that the ensuing culture encouraged aggressive tactics in dealing with minorities, protected officers who behaved illegally and resulted in vigorous responses to any form of criticism. In his view: 'The logical outcomes of such a culture were the Rodney King beating and the Rampart scandal.'⁹⁶

The police procedurals of the Fifties had effectively ignored the presence of minorities in Los Angeles but, in *L.A. Confidential*, the brutal treatment of the Latinos in Bloody Christmas is rapidly followed by even more ruthless treatment of African Americans, during the investigation of a wholly-fictional event which dominates the remainder of the movie. Newly promoted Detective Exley is first on the scene of a massacre at the Nite Owl cafe involving the murder of six people, one of whom is White's former partner, Stensland. Initial reports of 'three negroes' driving a particular car and discharging shotguns late at night in Griffith Park are followed by an eye-witness account of a similar car in the area of the Nite Owl at the time of the murders. While a large team of detectives methodically cross-check this information with vehicle registrations, Vincennes and Exley manage to trace the suspects through an African American informant. However, when they reach the address, they find that two other detectives have already arrived and have found three shotguns in the trunk of a car. The men are arrested at gun point but, by the time that they are next seen on camera, their facial cuts and bruises make it obvious that they have been beaten while in custody. They are then interrogated by Exley, without the benefit of an attorney and without any indication of the crime they are suspected of having committed. Under questioning, they break down and begin to admit their involvement in a

⁹⁶ Escobar, 'Bloody Christmas', p. 195.

quite separate offence, the kidnapping and rape of a woman who they have subsequently 'sold-out' to an acquaintance and who is, almost certainly, still the subject of imprisonment and sexual abuse. White, in his self-appointed role as protector of abused women, then pushes Exley aside and, thrusting his revolver into a suspect's mouth, forces him to reveal the location of their victim.

Leaving the prisoners in custody, the detectives pursue the kidnapped woman as a matter of urgency and, with the suspect's house surrounded, White asks Dudley Smith for permission to act on his own for a few minutes. He enters the house where he finds the woman, who has obviously been badly beaten and is naked, gagged and tied to a bed. White then shoots and kills the unarmed African American rapist, and plants a gun on the dead body to justify what has, in effect, been an illegal execution. Meanwhile, the three original prisoners have somehow managed to disappear from the police station but they are soon tracked down by Exley, who kills all three in a gunfight as they desperately try to avoid recapture. The rape victim testifies to a timetable of events which would have allowed the dead men to commit both crimes on the same night and the Nite Owl case is thus considered closed. Exley, previously regarded with contempt by his fellow detectives for his role in Bloody Christmas, now becomes a hero and is christened 'shotgun Ed' by a jocular Dudley.

The remainder of the movie deals with the unravelling of this neat and tidy conclusion, a process which involves journeys of personal discovery for White, Vincennes and Exley. White is more renowned for his muscle than his brainpower but it is his investigative work which cracks the case and, finally shedding his image as a brutal thug, he is domesticated by his love for the film's version of a 'redemptive woman', prostitute Lynne Bracken (Kim Basinger). 'Hollywood Jack' Vincennes, the corrupt cop, eventually

recovers his conscience and his pride in being a police officer and uses his dying words to give Exley a vital clue. Exley himself, an idealist who is initially portrayed as both feminised and bureaucratic, eventually secures his professional future through illegal violence and ruthless political opportunism. Through exposition, we learn that Dudley Smith is at the centre of a web of corruption which pervades the city's institutions of power and includes businessmen, politicians and other policemen. While Mickey Cohen, the notorious gangster is in jail, Smith and his cronies have taken over Cohen's drug rackets and steadily eliminated his potential rivals. Stensland, who had been involved in Smith's illegal activities, had stolen some heroin for his own purposes and was assassinated at the Nite Owl by rogue policemen, with the other five deaths representing collateral damage. The African American suspects were convenient scapegoats and the entire investigation was orchestrated by Smith, including falsified eye-witness accounts, the planting of evidence and the 'escape' from custody which lead to their deaths. Exley, for whom the Nite Owl case was a major career-boost, is nevertheless determined to establish the truth and, in this pursuit, eventually finds common ground with White. In a bloody finale, fearing that Smith will escape justice, Exley resorts to a tactic which he had rejected in an early scene and kills Smith by shooting him in the back while he is unarmed. He then exploits the Chief's desperation to avoid damaging publicity and persuades him to 'print the legend', a version of events in which organised crime becomes the villain of the piece, Exley is decorated for bravery and Smith recognised posthumously as a hero.

This dramatic sequence of events is not only critical to the development of the fiction but is also an accurate reflection of Fifties attitudes towards race, criminality, law and order and of the importance of public opinion to the politics of policing. In 1950, the combination of a predominantly white police force and an ethos of 'proactive policing'

placed white officers in direct conflict with young minority men on the streets of Los Angeles. In the minds of these ‘soldiers in the war on crime’, the ‘thin blue line’ became a racial divide and led to many allegations of police harassment and of excessive use of force.⁹⁷ Contemporary African American concerns were perhaps best illustrated by an editorial in the *California Eagle*, which felt obliged to provide its readers with a four-step guide to action when confronted by police brutality.⁹⁸

Uniformed officers provided the most frequent points of conflict between the L.A.P.D. and the African American community, but Parker’s attitudes towards race and criminality permeated the entire force, including the detective bureau. Although, in 1950, the L.A.P.D. abandoned its practice of breaking crime statistics down into ‘Arrest by Charge and Race’ tables, the racial and spatial composition of Los Angeles allowed the subsequent statistics, which are broken down by residential area, to be used to support the conflicting claims of police harassment or of excessive criminality. Parker was conscious of the issue and, in 1957, would declare that: ‘The demand that the police cease to consider race, color and creed is an unrealistic demand. Identification is a police tool, not a police attitude.’⁹⁹ In *L.A. Confidential*, the young black suspects have all served time in juvenile correctional facilities and, in the Fifties, such a combination of race and criminality would have been seen by most real-life L.A.P.D. detectives as a strong presumption of guilt. The execution of the African American rapist by White is partially justified to the audience by the man’s vicious treatment of his victim and by the sympathy generated by White’s pathological compulsion to protect women. Nevertheless, the act demonstrates how easily

⁹⁷ Boyer, ‘Bad Cops’, *New Yorker*, 21 May 2005, p. 71.

⁹⁸ ‘POLICE BRUTALITY AND WHAT TO DO’, *California Eagle*, 6 March 1952, L.A.P.D. Scrapbooks, no page reference provided.

⁹⁹ Orlando W. Wilson (ed.), *Parker on Police*, p. 147, referenced in Yang, ‘A Thin Blue Line Down Central Avenue’, p. 223.

vigilante justice could be exercised in an environment where racial profiling was commonplace and where loyalty to colleagues was placed ahead of the rule of law. The treatment of the fictional African American offenders in *L.A. Confidential* is not only consistent with the real history of the L.A.P.D. in the 1950s but also provided its 1990s audience with recognisable reminders of recent controversies.

The film's compelling blend of history and fiction was given particular contemporary resonance by the relationship of its subject matter to Rodney King and O.J. Simpson, the two black men who had come to symbolise the recent humiliations suffered by the L.A.P.D. In the circumstances, it was no surprise that many of those who commented upon the movie as cinematic entertainment also took the opportunity to reflect upon its contribution to contemporary discourses of law enforcement. In its dramatisation of Bloody Christmas and in the cuts and bruises sported by the Nite Owl suspects, the film provides obvious references to the King beating, while the framing of those suspects and the planting of evidence provides a link to the trial of O.J. Simpson and the allegations that a bloody glove found at Simpson's Brentwood home had been placed there by Detective Mark Fuhrman.

The publication of James Ellroy's novel had preceded the calamities of the early Nineties, but there is no doubt that both the creation and the reception of its screen adaptation were heavily influenced by those shocking events. Director Curtis Hanson, in an interview with *Sight and Sound*, echoed Edward Escobar's analysis by directly linking the Chief Parker's reforms with the problems of the 1990s. Hanson described 'the re-making of the Los Angeles police force so that the old-time corruption of cops on the take was replaced with a military model ... the image of which was sold to the public through *Dragnet* ... you end up with a police force that's clean, relatively speaking, but that has a

host of other problems, a police force that ... supposedly can do no wrong. And we're living with that now and we've seen what it's wrought in terms of police brutality'¹⁰⁰ *USA TODAY* reported that Russell Crowe prepared for his role as Bud White by reading transcripts of the trial of Stacey Koon, the L.A.P.D. Sergeant who was charged following the Rodney King beating.¹⁰¹ James Ellroy, discussing Hanson's adaptation of his novel in *Empire*, underlined the misleading nature of earlier representations: 'Look at the image of the LAPD ... in *Dragnet* then look at the footage of Rodney King getting his ass kicked; the OJ Simpson verdict which was nothing more than a referendum on race; and the LAPD's historical misconduct.'¹⁰²

Although many critics and commentators of the Nineties took the opportunity to link *L.A. Confidential*'s version of police racism, brutality and corruption to more recent scandals, most of those observations were made in publications which were based outside Los Angeles. Jack Mathews, writing in *Newsday*, noted that the film was set at a time when 'the L.A.P.D. was shifting from a frontier mentality to one modelled on the military and when the seeds of racism that would fuel riots fifteen and forty years later were sown.'¹⁰³ John Hartl, writing in the *Seattle Times* remarked that, while the film evokes the Fifties, yet 'somehow it feels as contemporary as Rodney King.'¹⁰⁴ David Baron in the *New Orleans Times Picayune* suggested that: 'In its expose of deep-seated corruption and endemic racism in the L.A.P.D. one can find the roots of the ills that tarnish the reputation of today's

¹⁰⁰ Amy Taubin, 'LA Lurid', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 7, no. 11, 1 November 1997, p. 8

¹⁰¹ *USA TODAY*, 19 September 1997, *L.A. Confidential*, Clippings File, Margaret Herrick Library.

¹⁰² Jeff Dawson, 'Mean Streets', *Empire*, no. 102, 1 December 1997, p. 76.

¹⁰³ Jack Mathews, 'A 90s *Chinatown* Depicts 50s LA', *Newsday* (Long Island), 18 September 1997, p. B3.

¹⁰⁴ John Hartl, '*LA Confidential*', *Seattle Times*, 19 September 1997, p. G3

L.A.P.D.’¹⁰⁵ John Powers in *Vogue* stated that: ‘In the movie’s corrosive portrait of Fifties LA we can recognise the city’s future —the Rodney King videotape, OJ sauntering down the freeway’, while *Rolling Stone* columnist, Peter Travers wrote: ‘*L.A. Confidential* kicks off the fall film season on a high note by finding its own way into Hollywood’s criminal past, circa 1953, and locating parallels to the racial bonfires ignited by the likes of O.J. Simpson, and L.A. cops Stacey Koon and Mark Fuhrman.’¹⁰⁶ Roger Ebert, in the *Chicago Sun Times*, identified the roots of contemporary problems in the character of Captain Dudley Smith: ‘seemingly so helpful but the eyes are cold and in his values can be seen, perhaps, the road ahead to Rodney King.’¹⁰⁷

In the greater Los Angeles area, film critics and other journalists generally avoided linking the film with contemporary difficulties for the L.A.P.D., perhaps assuming that their readers were suffering from media-overload after years of saturation coverage of King and Simpson. In the week of its release, the *Los Angeles Times* ran three separate articles on *L.A. Confidential*, while the *Orange County Register* and the *Daily News* each published independent reviews. Despite a substantial amount of coverage, none of these articles made any reference to the recent crises, although the *Press Telegram* and *Daily Breeze* (Torrance, CA) syndicated Roger Ebert’s previously quoted article from the *Chicago Sun Times* and

¹⁰⁵ David Baron, ‘*LA Confidential* slick 50s crime story for the 90s’, *Times Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), in *L.A. Confidential*, Clippings File, Margaret Herrick Library, no page reference available.

¹⁰⁶ John Powers, ‘Movies’, *Vogue*, September 1997, p. 418; Peter Travers, ‘*L.A. Confidential*’, *Rolling Stone*, Issue 770, 2 October 1997, p. 59.

¹⁰⁷ Roger Ebert, ‘Hollywood’s Sinful Past: *LA Confidential*’, *Chicago Sun Times*, 19 September 1997, p. 35.

Peter Ramer, writing in *New Times LA*, suggested that: ‘It’s as if we were witnessing the origins of an outrage which is still with us’.¹⁰⁸

If Angelenos were largely denied the stimulation of newspaper articles to spark consideration of the movie’s relevance to recent events, then there was no such problem for readers of *The Recorder*, a San Francisco-based legal journal. Terry Diggs, looking back on the year’s films, made perhaps the most extreme claim for *L.A. Confidential*’s contemporary relevance when she speculated that: ‘the film of the year may finally explain the Trial of the Century. James Ellroy ... clearly wasn’t one of the millions of Americans stunned by the O.J. Simpson verdict. No one understands the intersection of capitalism and celebrity and crime better than Ellroy. And—like Lance Ito’s jurors—Ellroy is quick to identify the place where the City of Angels’ irreconcilable elements collide: the Los Angeles Police Department.’ Diggs went on to suggest that the efforts of Vincennes, White and Exley to ‘remember why they became policemen in the first place’ should be seen as an invitation to the audience to consider ‘what exactly the police protect and whom specifically law enforcement serves.’ From Diggs’ perspective, *L.A. Confidential* suggests that ‘the well-off white guys get to keep it all’, a sentiment which she finds to apply in equal measure to Los Angeles in 1997. She accuses the L.A.P.D. of pandering to the city’s white elite by having sold ‘the idea that vast areas of the city are enemy territory’, and argues that ‘the infamous sweeps and curfews’ have persuaded the population that street crime is a serious threat. Thus she condemns policing in Los Angeles as ‘an endorser of existing power relationships’ rather than ‘an insurer of equal opportunities’ and she sees in

¹⁰⁸ Peter Ramer, ‘Police Brutality’, *New Times LA*, 18 September 1997, p. 30.

L.A. Confidential 'a cycle of fabrications and false starts and political pronouncements that will, inevitably, produce Mark Fuhrman.'¹⁰⁹

In his study of film noir, James Naremore devotes a few brief, largely condemnatory paragraphs to *L.A. Confidential*, which he describes as 'crowd-pleasing melodrama.' While accusing the film of using the past 'superficially and hypocritically', he considers it to be 'mere nostalgia' compared to the 'complex historical relevance' which he identifies and applauds in *Chinatown* (1974).¹¹⁰ Kenneth James Fox supports Naremore's view and adds his own suggestion that the film has 'little to say about the demonising of ... [minority communities] ... by the Los Angeles police.'¹¹¹ My own reading suggests that, through its exploration of the 1950s, *L.A. Confidential* offers original insights into a formative stage in the development of the L.A.P.D., while also providing an historical context for its contemporary failings. The film's reconstruction of Bloody Christmas illustrates the violent police treatment of Latinos, which was a feature of the 1940s and 1950s, in a way which invites its audience to associate that incident with the King beating and which reinforces the importance of the mass media in influencing public attitudes towards the police. Its representations of racial profiling, racism and brutality towards African Americans in the 1950s are consistent with many of the findings published by the Christopher Commission in 1991. It also suggests the existence of a culture which persuades many police officers to place loyalty to colleagues ahead of public service, an issue which, by 1998, would become particularly relevant as prosecutors in Los Angeles attempted to unravel the complex web of allegations which comprised the Rampart scandal.

¹⁰⁹ Terry Diggs, 'An Elite Force', *The Recorder*, Jan 7 1998, p. 1. Lance Ito was the presiding judge in the 1995 criminal trial of O.J. Simpson, often described in the media as 'the trial of the century'.

¹¹⁰ Naremore, *More Than Night*, pp. 275-76.

¹¹¹ Fox, *Cinematic Visions of Los Angeles*, p. 91.

4. *Training Day* (2001)

You protect the sheep by catching the wolves. It takes a wolf to catch a wolf.

Alonzo Harris (Denzel Washington) in *Training Day*.

Whoever chases monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster himself.

Rampart C.R.A.S.H. Officer Rafael Perez.¹¹²

The potential tension between a police officer's desire to protect the public and his obligation to act within legal boundaries is a familiar theme within cinematic discourse. Perhaps the most famous example is to be found in *Dirty Harry* in which Inspector Harry Callaghan (Clint Eastwood) adopts extreme methods, including torture, in his attempts to bring a serial killer to justice. In posing the question of whether the end justified the means, Don Siegel's film gave its audience every reason to support the vigilante cop. Callaghan's character was a contemporary, urban reinterpretation of a nineteenth-century frontier-lawman which traded heavily on Eastwood's status as a Western icon. He had little sympathy for the legal rights of suspects but was committed to safeguarding the public and uninterested in personal gain or preferment, while his target was known by the audience to be a cold-blooded killer who held a child's life in the balance.

Although many subsequent police movies have included scenes which explore similar themes, few film-makers have proclaimed their intention to expose the issue to public debate. In writing the screenplay of *Training Day*, David Ayer made clear his wish to stimulate discussion on an apparently simple question: whether the public preferred police who are effective in reducing crime, or police who follow the law.¹¹³ Ayer, who had grown up in South Central Los Angeles, was on record as professing personal sympathy for

¹¹² Rafael Perez quoted in Cannon, 'One Bad Cop', p. 41.

¹¹³ David J. Leonard, *Screens Fade to Black: Contemporary African American Culture* (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 2006), p. 51.

officers who use illegal methods when dealing with gang members: 'I can absolutely justify somebody throwing down guns and crack on gangsters to lock them up because it's a cat-and-mouse game ... It's almost impossible to lock these guys up. ... You just never catch them dirty.'¹¹⁴ His cinematic fiction was given particular contemporary resonance by its obvious references to the Rampart scandal, the final instalment in the series of misfortunes which beset the L.A.P.D. in the 1990s.

That unfortunate decade had provided a steady supply of individual L.A.P.D. officers to be demonised in the media. From 1991 to 1993, the videotape of the King beating and the subsequent legal proceedings had made Stacey Koon, Laurence Powell, Timothy Wind and Theodore Briseno the unacceptable public faces of the L.A.P.D. Then, in 1995, they were replaced in that role by Mark Fuhrman, who was exposed as a racist and a perjurer during the Simpson trial. Since these poster-boys for police misconduct were all white officers involved in the arrest of African American men, their behaviour was consistent with the long-established reputation of the predominantly white L.A.P.D. for riding roughshod over the rights of minorities. However, in 1998, these 'usual suspects' were supplanted in the headlines by the unlikely figure of Rampart C.R.A.S.H. Officer Rafael Perez. Born in Puerto Rico of mixed Latino and African American descent, Perez was fluent in Spanish and had developed a reputation as an outstanding officer, whose productivity in making arrests was matched by his persuasiveness in the court room.¹¹⁵ Just like his white predecessors, he was jailed for brutal treatment of a minority male, in his case the illegal shooting of gang-member Javier Ovando while in police custody. However, unlike most other rogue officers in the modern L.A.P.D., Perez was a self-confessed thief

¹¹⁴ David Ayer interviewed by Glenn Whipp, *Press-Telegram*, 8 October 2001, p. C1.

¹¹⁵ Cannon, 'One Bad Cop', p. 34.

and drug-dealer who was suspected of involvement in a bank robbery and in an unsolved murder. In an attempt to reduce his own punishment, Perez spent more than a year reviewing Rampart case-files and testified to a web of corrupt activity which an official report would later describe as ‘one of the worst police scandals in American history.’¹¹⁶

The scandal was certainly influential in affecting a significant change in cinematic depictions of the L.A.P.D. Within the next few years, a clutch of police movies set in Los Angeles were produced, all of which were in some way informed and influenced by the scandal and included a version of a ‘dirty cop’. However, the most direct cinematic allusions to Rampart are to be found in Antoine Fuqua’s *Training Day*, the story of twenty-four hours in the life of Jake Hoyte (Ethan Hawke), an ambitious L.A.P.D. patrolman from the San Fernando Valley. Hoyte is offered the chance to audition for a job in an undercover narcotics unit, an assignment which he sees as a stepping-stone to a detective’s badge and which requires him to spend a ‘training day’ working alongside Detective Sergeant Alonzo Harris (Denzel Washington), who will assess Hoyte’s suitability to join his team. However, while Hoyte’s interest is genuine, Harris intends to exploit the young officer’s eagerness for promotion as a means to solve a pressing personal problem. A few days earlier, during an off-duty weekend in Las Vegas, Harris had killed an associate of the Russian mafia and has until midnight to obtain sufficient cash to pay-off his blood debt. While apparently exposing Hoyte to the realities of life as an undercover ‘narc’, Harris plans to orchestrate his involvement in armed robbery and murder, either as an accomplice or as a scapegoat. Ultimately, Hoyte’s strength of character overcomes his ambition and he is able to resist Harris’ efforts, first to incriminate him and subsequently to kill him. By the end of the movie he has retained his integrity, defeated Harris and has recovered a large amount of

¹¹⁶ *Report of the Rampart Independent Review Panel to the Police Commission*, p.1.

stolen money, leaving the corrupt officer to be executed by the Russians in a hail of machine-gun bullets.

Scriptwriter David Ayer had begun trying to sell a version of his story as early as 1995 and, in pre-release press interviews, he was keen to point out that his story preceded the Rampart Scandal, as evinced by these comments, reported in the *Press-Telegram*: ‘The thing that ticks me off is that everybody thinks it's about Rafael Perez ... and I'd never heard of the guy when I wrote it.’¹¹⁷ Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, Ayer acknowledged that his work had been influenced by the films of Sidney Lumet but also stressed the importance of his personal experiences of police behaviour in South Central Los Angeles. Nevertheless, he was forced to acknowledge the influence of Rampart in finally making the project commercially viable: ‘No one believed cops acted that way. Once the Rampart scandal broke ... Suddenly it became topical. But everybody in my neighborhood knew cops like that. They took it for granted.’¹¹⁸

Although Ayer’s original story may have been written without the direct influence of Rampart, the film itself contains multiple references to the scandal. In an early scene, after Harris has persuaded him to smoke marijuana, Hoyte says that he is fearful of arrest since the recent ‘scandals’ have made the command less tolerant of aberrant behaviour and, later in the movie, a senior L.A.P.D. officer who is complicit in Harris’ corrupt behaviour, warns him to make sure that he does not make the front-page ‘like those other ass-holes’. However, the strongest link to Rampart is provided by the similarities between the disgraced C.R.A.S.H. officer and the leading character in the movie, including a general physical likeness between Perez and Alonzo Harris. Manohla Dargis, writing in *LA Weekly*,

¹¹⁷ David Ayer interviewed by Glenn Whipp, p. C1.

¹¹⁸ David Ayer, ‘Fall Sneaks: A Story From The Streets’, *Los Angeles Times*, 9 September 2001, Calendar p. 1.

describes Harris as ‘the ultimate gangsta cop, a charismatic, almost messianic figure, equal parts John Shaft, Rafael Perez and Jim Jones, but better-looking, sexy.’¹¹⁹ Andy Klein, writing in *New Times Los Angeles* has remarked that ‘Washington ... seems to be coiffed and made-up to look a little like Raphael Perez’.¹²⁰ Steve Sailer, in a review of the film for UPI, quotes an interview with Kevin McKesson, the attorney who represented Perez at trial, who extends the comparison beyond physical appearances: ‘McKesson noted that there are now ‘striking similarities’ between the character portrayed by Washington and his client Perez. For example, both are black and bilingual, even though McKesson estimates that only three or four out of about 1,000 black LAPD officers can speak Spanish’.¹²¹ Apart from their shared appearance, language skills and criminality, Perez and Harris also seem to have had similar recreational interests. Perez had spent a notorious weekend in Las Vegas with the bank-robber David Mack, while the deadly consequences of a recent visit by Harris to ‘Sin City’ provided the immediate motivation for his criminal acts. Perez had a reputation as a womaniser and numbered among his conquests Veronica Quesada, a Honduran night-club singer with a drug habit, whose arrest proved to be significant in the development of the case against him. Some of the critical scenes in *Training Day* are set in the home of Harris’s mistress who is a native of El Salvador, a near-neighbour of Honduras.

¹¹⁹ Manohla Dargis, ‘Born To Be Bad: Denzel Washington’s Lethal Charm’, *LA Weekly*, 3 October 2001, paragraph 2, found at <<http://www.laweekly.com/2001-10-11/film-tv/born-to-be-bad/>> on 20 May 2009. John Shaft (Richard Roundtree) was the black private-eye and ‘superstud’ in *Shaft* (1971). Jim Jones was the leader of The Peoples’ Temple, a cult responsible for the mass-suicide of nine hundred people in Guyana in 1978.

¹²⁰ Andy Klein, ‘Bad Cop, Bad Cop’, *New Times Los Angeles*, 4 October 2001, pp. 33-34.

¹²¹ Steve Sailer, ‘*Training Day*’, UPI, 4 October 2001, found at <http://www.isteve.com/Film_Training_Day.htm> on 16 September 2009.

David J. Leonard has pointed out that, even though Harris is an undercover cop, from the beginning of the movie there are a number of indications that he should be viewed as a criminal rather than a police officer. He wears black leather with gold-chains and a diamond earring, he carries several guns which are not official issue and he drives an attention-grabbing Monte Carlo low-rider.¹²² However, just as Clint Eastwood had invested the character of ‘Dirty Harry’ Callaghan with his own cinematic persona, so the casting of Denzel Washington as Harris provided powerful motivation for the audience to give Harris the benefit of the doubt. Before *Training Day*, Washington’s repertoire had consisted either of men of wholly-good character or of transgressors, such as Malcolm X and Reuben ‘Hurricane’ Carter, who had subsequently demonstrated a capacity for redemption. Glenn Whipp, writing in the *Press-Telegram*, borrowed a phrase from another famous movie to observe that the role ‘marks the first time the normally heroic Washington has crossed over to the dark side of the force.’¹²³ Nevertheless, most critics praised the charisma which Washington brought to his portrayal of a complex character, in a typically powerful performance that would be rewarded by the Oscar for Best Actor at the 2002 Academy Awards Ceremony.¹²⁴

For almost two thirds of *Training Day*, the scenes between Harris and Hoyte validate Ayer’s claimed intent to dramatise the choices which a community can make in terms of its preferred style of policing. Harris provides Hoyte with a series of plausible, and

¹²² Leonard, *Screens Fade to Black*, p. 53.

¹²³ Glenn Whipp, ‘*Training Day* Close to Home for L.A.’, *Press-Telegram*, 8 October 2001, p. C 1.

¹²⁴ Examples from local newspapers include Bob Strauss, ‘Denzel Gives Lessons In How To Stop The Show’, *Daily News*, 5 October 2001, p. L7; Henry Sheehan, ‘*Training Day* Darkens at End’, *Orange County Register*, 5 October 2001, p. 10; Gil Robertson IV, ‘Denzel Washington at His Finest’, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 18 October 2001, p. B-6.

increasingly challenging, examples which support his basic premise: to be effective in the inner city, narcotics officers need to follow the law in an extremely selective fashion. At first, his admonitions seem to be sensible advice from a street-wise veteran. He warns Hoyte to ‘unlearn that bullshit they teach you at the Academy. That shit’ll get you killed out here.’ He urges him to become conversant in Spanish, in order to avoid being disadvantaged when dealing with Latinos, and to leave his wedding ring at home in order to avoid any sign of vulnerability which could be exploited on the street. After intercepting some white college kids who have just purchased marijuana from a street dealer, Harris will not allow Hoyte to ‘call it in’ and handles the situation in a harsh but pragmatic fashion. Rather than arresting the youngsters he chooses to terrify them: by stopping them at gun point, confiscating their drugs, warning them to stay out of gang areas and threatening both official and unofficial retribution if they return. Although his actions are clearly outside procedural guidelines, they can easily be justified as a common sense solution: the students avoid a criminal record but receive a short, sharp shock which makes a repeat offence unlikely, while taxpayers avoid the costs of the judicial processes and police officers can devote their time to the pursuit of more sinister figures.

In the following scene, Harris pushes the boundaries a little further and uses Hoyte’s ambition to the full when he sets out to persuade him to smoke marijuana. Despite Harris’ argument that ‘a good narcotics officer should know and love narcotics’, Hoyte initially refuses to participate in an illegal activity. In a theatrical gesture, Harris then suddenly stops the car in a busy intersection and puts a gun to Hoyte’s head, telling him to go home since any undercover officer who refused drugs from a dealer on the street ‘would be dead by now.’ Faced with this harsh, but still plausible rationale, Hoyte reluctantly agrees to smoke

the marijuana which, unknown to him, Harris has made more potent by lacing it with PCP.¹²⁵

As the officers continue to cruise around the inner-city, Hoyte is obviously suffering from the effects of the drugs but is sufficiently alert to spot an attempted rape in progress in an alley. Leaving the car, he overpowers and handcuffs two assailants while Harris observes from a distance. Harris then demonstrates that his disregard for proper legal process extends to a serious sexual offence and an assault on a fellow-officer. After brutally pistol-whipping one of the would-be rapists, he confiscates their money and drugs and chooses to set them free rather than make arrests. He advises the young Latina victim, who lives in a nearby *barrio*, to have her cousins, understood to be gang-members, take their own revenge on her assailants. When Hoyte complains that the men should have been arrested, Harris' response is typically blunt:

Get over it. You wanna go runnin' and gunnin', stay in patrol. This is investigations. Leave the garbage to the garbage men. We're professional anglers. We go after the big fish.

He argues that, having been beaten, having lost their money and drugs and having been set up as a target for retaliation by the girl's relatives, 'street justice' has been served upon the assailants and that his own time is too valuable to waste in charging them. When Hoyte continues to challenge his decision, Harris defends his selective approach with a boastful account of his own record as an arresting-officer:

They build prisons caus'a me! Judges have handed out fifteen thousand man-years of incarceration time based on my investigations. My record speaks for itself. So why do I got the best arrest and conviction record in the county. Why? 'Cause I don't handicap myself with bullshit. The rules. I take down the duly deserving. I'm not locking up Mr. Nine-to-five, Mr. Family Provider.

¹²⁵ For the significance of PCP, see Chapter IV, 2, *Colors*, n. 52, p. 181.

Harris then goes on the offensive by challenging Hoyte on the use of a highly-controversial technique for restraining suspects which the young officer had employed when overpowering one of the would-be rapists:

Harris: That the choke hold I saw you applying? Isn't that a big no-no, procedure-boy?

Hoyte: Well ... I was getting my ass kicked.

Harris: You did what you had to do.

As previously noted, the choke hold had been in regular use by the L.A.P.D. until the death of James Mincy in 1982 but, since that time, its use had been restricted to situations of mortal danger. With Harris present as a fully-armed observer, Hoyte's use of the choke hold, albeit well-intentioned, was a breach of L.A.P.D. regulations which Harris exploits to support his continuing theme: that an officer on the street needs to follow legal procedures in a selective fashion.

Hoyte's education continues when he makes a clumsy attempt to buy some crack from a wheel-chair-bound drug-dealer who immediately recognises him as a cop. After an initial search of the dealer's clothing produces a loaded gun but no drugs, Harris forces a pen down the man's throat, a blatantly illegal action which forces him to regurgitate six 'rocks' of crack cocaine. Possession of five grams or more of crack carried a mandatory sentence of at least five years in federal prison, leading Harris to tell the dealer: 'you federally fucked now.'¹²⁶ However, even with crimes of this magnitude, Harris is prepared

¹²⁶ *Thirty Years of America's Drug War*, found at <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/drugs/cron/>> on 7 January 2011. This sentencing policy, part of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, was highly controversial, since crack was mostly associated with African Americans and since powdered cocaine, the form preferred by most white users, required possession of five hundred grams to generate the same five-year sentence. In 2010, the Fair Sentencing Act increased the amount of crack required to trigger a five-year sentence from five grams to twenty-eight grams.

to barter the man's freedom in exchange for information and allows the suspect to leave without charge after he provides the name of a much bigger dealer, 'the Sandman'.

Harris and Hoyte then raid the Sandman's house, bluffing their way past his wife with a 'warrant' which is, in fact, a Chinese Takeaway menu. Then, while Hoyte restrains the woman, he observes Harris pocketing a package which he has found during the search, marking a critical juncture in the film. Up to this point, it remains plausible to share director Antoine Fuqua's opinion that: 'a lot of people who will look at Alonzo and think he's a great cop. And in some ways, he is. He probably started out doing good, but he's taken his authority way too far.'¹²⁷ However, by stealing what is later revealed to be forty thousand dollars from the Sandman, Harris begins a string of criminal acts which have no motive other than personal gain and which erase from his character what Steve Sailer has described as its earlier 'fascinating moral ambiguity.'¹²⁸

With the Sandman's cash in his pocket, Harris takes Hoyte to a downtown restaurant, where *Training Day's* view of police corruption is given a broader context through the involvement of three senior police officers, 'the wise men'. After Hoyte is moved out of earshot, the conversation quickly establishes that the group is aware of Alonzo's problem with the Russians and, through an anecdote involving the incompetence of a judge and her bailiffs, demonstrates that they share a cynical contempt for the effectiveness of the judicial process. More significantly, they also make clear the depth of their corruption when, in exchange for the cash which Alonzo has stolen from the Sandman, they agree to help him find the much larger amount required to pay off the Russians by approving a warrant for the arrest of Roger (Scott Glenn), a major drug dealer.

¹²⁷ Whipp, 'Training Day Close to Home for L.A.', p. C1.

¹²⁸ Sailer, 'Training Day'.

This brief indication of a deep-seated culture of corruption within the senior ranks of the L.A.P.D. is a representation which seems to owe more to Ayer's acknowledged admiration of *Serpico* and *Prince Of The City* (1981) than to any verifiable interpretation of police misconduct in Los Angeles. With the exception of Perez and Durden, no evidence was produced to indicate that Rampart officers had exploited their positions for financial gain in the manner which had bedevilled the N.Y.P.D. in the Sixties and Seventies. The most senior officer to be charged was a sergeant and most of the allegations involved offences, such as falsification of evidence and mistreatment of suspects, which were apparently intended to secure convictions rather than to line the pockets of the officers concerned.¹²⁹

Armed with the warrant and with Hoyte in tow, Harris and four members of his regular team raid Roger's house where, after telling him that the wise men need to 'tax' him in order to support their 'boats, mistresses and house-payments', they find four million dollars hidden under the floorboards. Up to this point, Hoyte has participated in what he believes is a genuine arrest but is shocked when Harris orders him to shoot Roger in cold blood. Hoyte refuses, only for Harris himself to murder Roger and to steal enough cash to reward his team and to pay-off his own debt. He then offers Hoyte the chance to participate in the cover-up and to take not only a share of the cash but also the credit for an heroic role in the raid, calculating that the potentially career-ending combination of marijuana and PCP in Hoyte's bloodstream will persuade him to co-operate. However, when it becomes apparent that Hoyte will resist pressure and is determined to tell the truth, Harris tricks the

¹²⁹ Whipp, '*Training Day* Close to Home for L.A.', p. C1. The detailed provisions of the Consent Decree of 2000 also confirm the Justice Department was primarily concerned with issues such as racial profiling and excessive use of force rather than corruption for personal gain.

young officer into accompanying him to the home of some Latino gang-members with whom he has arranged Hoyte's execution. After Harris has left the scene, a coincidence worthy of Charles Dickens saves Hoyte from death when he manages to establish that the young Latina whom he rescued from attempted rape is a cousin of one of his would-be killers. Despite having received a large sum of money to kill Hoyte, the grateful gang leader spares his life, thus setting the stage for his final showdown with Harris.

Henry Sheehan, writing in the *Orange County Register*, criticised the dramatic structure of *Training Day* by describing its final third as: 'a concession to contemporary appetites for ultra-violence, but a betrayal of the carefully worked-out, grimy drama that preceded it.'¹³⁰ The revelation that Harris' behaviour is criminal and motivated by reasons of personal gain also causes the film to sacrifice any further ambitions it had to provoke a significant debate regarding police behaviour. Despite this failure, *Training Day* nevertheless managed to stimulate considerable discussion about race and spatiality in Los Angeles, with some surprising consequences for a film directed by an African American and starring America's leading black film actor. In particular, its Manichean contrast between an evil, black rogue-cop and an heroic white officer has led some African American commentators to characterise the movie as racist. Writing in the *New York Amsterdam News*, Vinette K. Pryce expressed her disappointment that Denzel Washington would be willing to play such a thoroughly bad character: 'For all the racism which prevails in every police department in America, some moviegoers will take umbrage to the character assassination and racial profiling in the film. ... The cops caught on video as violators of Rodney King's civil rights were white. The cops who sodomized Haitian immigrant Abner Louima were all white. Yet no writer/director has offered a feature to project a black/white

¹³⁰ Sheehan, 'Training Day Darkens at End', p. 10.

cop partnership where a white has strong-armed a Black to act as outlaw.’¹³¹ The film critic of the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, although equally surprised at Washington’s willingness to ‘play the bad guy’, took a different point of view, referring to the star’s ‘body of work that mirrors the many aspects of black male life.’ In his view Washington produces ‘a gritty and realistic example of a morally ambiguous undercover cop.’¹³²

Although the depiction of Latinos in *Training Day* as mindless, tattooed gang-bangers is open to charges of racial stereotyping, the film critic of the Latino newspaper *La Opinión* seemed unperturbed by such representations and chose to praise the film for its portrayal of ‘the rough and violent reality that can be found daily on the streets of ... Los Angeles.’¹³³ Amongst white critics, while Roger Ebert echoed Vinette Price in musing upon the unlikely possibility of a film which featured ‘a rotten white cop showing a black rookie the ropes’, David Denby praised both Washington’s performance and the screenplay. He suggested that ‘in making ... the rogue cop a brilliant African American ... the script is able to exploit the speed, verve and knowingness of the black street idiom while pushing past liberal pieties about race.’¹³⁴

In academic discourse, at least three scholars have expressed reservations over the perspectives on race contained within *Training Day*. Marilyn Yaquinto, while acquitting

¹³¹ Vinette K. Pryce, ‘Denzel Helps Lighten White Cop Image’, *New York Amsterdam News*, 4 October 2001, p. 20. Abner Louima was beaten and sodomised with a broom handle while in N.Y.P.D. custody in 1997, a case which led to the long-term imprisonment of two officers and damages in excess of \$8,000,000. Sewell Chan, ‘The Abner Louima Case, Ten Years Later’, *New York Times*, 9 August 2007, p.1.

¹³² Gil L. Robertson IV, ‘Denzel Washington at His Finest’, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 18 October 2001, p. B6.

¹³³ Juan Rodríguez Flores, ‘La lógica entre el bien y el mal’, *La Opinión*, 24 September 2001, pp. D1, D6.

¹³⁴ Roger Ebert, ‘*Training Day* Lesson in Over The Top Fun’, *Daily Breeze*, 5 October 2001, no page reference provided, found at <<http://infoweb.newsbank.com>> on 4 September 2009; David Denby, ‘On The Beat: Denzel Washington gets tough’, *New Yorker*, vol. 73, no. 17, 15 October 2001, pp. 218-19.

the film of any ‘conscious effort to be racist’ has nevertheless characterised its battle ‘for the soul of the movie cop’ as a defeat for reality at the hands of a mythology which is itself based upon race. In her opinion, Harris embodies the ‘problematical rogue’, whose blackness ‘dooms him to being demonized and destroyed’ while Hoyte is a ‘street Tarzan’ who must quell the ‘dangerous physicality’ of ‘the natives.’¹³⁵ Aaron Baker’s criticism is more direct and suggests that the juxtaposition of a black villain and a white hero indicates a link between race and criminality, while conveniently ignoring the long history of white racism in the L.A.P.D.¹³⁶ In a more detailed critique which locates *Training Day* within a socio-political context, David J. Leonard contends that the character of Alonzo Harris as an absentee father is ‘crude, sexually aggressive and homophobic’ and that the depiction of other African Americans as lazy, violent and angry confirms ‘long-standing white supremacist racial stereotypes’. By comparison, Jake Hoyte, as a white officer who is dedicated ‘to protect and to serve’, is a representation of the American Dream and is ‘a source of redemption for the LAPD and the state’ as he overcomes ‘the corrupt and dangerous Alonzo Harris.’ Leonard also echoes Baker in criticising the film for its focus upon ‘the inherent criminality of blackness’ and in arguing that its concentration on the ‘criminalized black body of Alonzo’ as the source of abuse ‘erases the racial context and history of American policing’. He contends that the film is thus disconnected from events such as the Rodney King beating and Rampart, which he describes as ‘incidences of police brutality, abuse and corruption, all of which have been particularly harmful to communities of color’.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Yaquinto, *Policing the World’s Rogue Cop*, pp. 232, 237.

¹³⁶ Baker, ‘Beyond the Thin Line of Black and Blue’, p. 56.

¹³⁷ Leonard, *Screen Fades to Black*, p. 23.

Baker and Leonard are correct to point out that, in the history of the modern L.A.P.D., an overwhelming majority of instances of police misconduct have consisted of the abuse of racial minorities by white officers. The exception to this rule, which justifies *Training Day*'s use of an African American in its leading role, was the Rampart scandal, the topical hook upon which the fictional drama was hung and in which the two police officers convicted of serious crimes were both black. Although the willingness of an African American Hollywood leading man with the earning power of Denzel Washington to portray an irredeemably evil character could, in isolation, be seen as racially progressive, the film's juxtaposition of black evil and white heroism, coupled with the unrealistic nature of its final scenes, allowed its critics to make justifiable charges of racism.

Leonard is also highly critical of the aspect of the film which most clearly links race and spatiality. Like *Colors* and *Boyz N the Hood*, the credibility of *Training Day* is enhanced by its use of authentic locations in inner-city areas of Los Angeles. Fuqua was particularly proud of his work on location in hitherto inaccessible areas of the city and claimed that gang members made the locations safe for the actors and crew, with 'various members of the Crips and Bloods factions for providing security as bodyguards.'¹³⁸ Writing in the *Daily News*, Bob Strauss noted the significance of these settings: 'Filmed in actual precincts of Rampart ... Imperial Courts, Crenshaw and the like, the movie offers a vision of war zone L.A. every bit as frightening and volatile as Alonzo's wheedling personality is.'¹³⁹

Imperial Courts, otherwise known as 'the jungle', is the most dramatically important location in the movie. Built in the Watts district of Los Angeles in 1944, this

¹³⁸ Whipp, 'Training Day Close To Home For L.A.', p. C1.

¹³⁹ Strauss, 'Denzel Gives Lessons In How To Stop The Show', p. L7.

federally-subsidised housing project comprises almost four hundred and fifty housing units, predominantly occupied by African Americans.¹⁴⁰ As Marilyn Yaquinto has observed, at this point in the film, notions of race and spatiality within Los Angeles are clearly displayed on screen.¹⁴¹ Whereas Hoyte lives in a safe, white area of the San Fernando Valley with his wife and young daughter, Harris keeps an apartment in Imperial Courts as the home of one of his four mistresses and her young son. Hoyte is already aware of its reputation as a ‘no-go’ area for the L.A.P.D. and is warned by Harris never to venture there without his protection. He claims to have the respect of the gang-members who live there: ‘I treat ‘em fair. They know if they cross that line, I’m taxing that ass.’ However, what Harris considers fair is to exploit his position as a police officer by operating a system of threats and rewards to keep his neighbours in line, or in Leonard’s words: ‘Alonzo rules as alpha wolf due to his coercion of the black and Latino male population.’¹⁴² The true nature of this relationship becomes clear in the closing sequences of the film when Hoyte returns to Imperial Courts in order to confront Harris. After outfighting his adversary, the young white man finds himself surrounded by a heavily armed group of African Americans to whom the wounded Harris appeals for help: ‘First one who puts one in his head, I’ll make you a rich man.’ However, seeing an opportunity to free themselves from oppression, the gang members refuse to co-operate: ‘You got us twisted, homie. You gotta put your own work in round here.’ Their resentment of Harris is apparently sufficient for them to allow Hoyte to drive away with the stolen money, while Harris’ protests reveal his contempt for the other

¹⁴⁰ Jaqueline Leavitt and Allan Heskin, ‘Housing and Community’, in *South Central Los Angeles: Anatomy of a Housing Crisis*, a report issued by Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies, June 1993, p.35, found at <http://lewis.spsr.ucla.edu/publications/workingpapers/06part1.pdf> on 9 October, 2009.

¹⁴¹ Yaquinto, *Policing the World’s Rogue Cop*, p. 231.

¹⁴² Leonard, *Screens Fade to Black*, p. 52.

residents: 'I'm the police. I run shit here! You just live here!' In Leonard's view, this scene 'imagines the goodness of the state ... controlling places like the jungle' whereas, 'in real life, its residents are likely to suffer harassment, surveillance and systematic arrest'. Harris as a rogue cop absorbs the corruption of the entire L.A.P.D., thus 'absolving a racist power structure' and providing 'redemption of the black community ... through white intervention.'¹⁴³

In their efforts to make *Training Day* commercially successful, authentic and thought-provoking, director Antoine Fuqua and script-writer David Ayer leaned heavily on a formula which had brought great success to earlier inner-city dramas such as *New Jack City* and *Boyz N the Hood*. The presence of Washington and Hawke as headliners was augmented by the use of gritty and previously unfilmed locations, by the inclusion of three popular rappers in supporting roles, and by a soundtrack dominated by rap music.¹⁴⁴ The visual and verbal references to *Rampart* provided the fiction with a contemporary context and, for most of the movie, a combination of Ayer's script and Washington's screen persona made it possible to believe in Harris as a 'Dirty Harry' for the twenty-first century inner city, an effective cop who has no compunction about breaking the rules in pursuit of his own version of justice. However, from the point that Harris steals forty thousand dollars from the Sandman, his rapid decline into overt criminality undermines his credibility as a representation of a police officer and thus marks the end of Ayer's aspirations to pose significant questions about alternative approaches to policing. The unrealistic and melodramatic conclusion of the film further jeopardises its claims to authenticity while strengthening the case of those critics who condemn it as racist.

¹⁴³ Leonard, *Screens Fade to Black*, p. 60.

¹⁴⁴ Snoop Dogg performed as the wheel-chair bound drug dealer, Macy Gray as the Sandman's wife and Dr Dre as a member of Harris' team.

5. *Dark Blue* (2003)

Reverence for human life must always be the first priority . . . during a stakeout or the surveillance of known criminals.

L.A.P.D. Chief Daryl Gates.¹⁴⁵

At least the bullets are in the bad guys, not in us!

Detective Sergeant Eldon Perry (Kurt Russell) in *Dark Blue*.

Dark Blue provides a cinematic coda for the L.A.P.D. in the Nineties, by encapsulating in one movie all the tribulations faced by the force in that disastrous decade. The Rodney King beating and the Los Angeles riots are used as the dramatic backdrop to a story featuring a trigger-happy group of detectives who are as racist as Mark Fuhrman and as corrupt as Rafael Perez. Set in 1992, during the final days of the trial of the officers charged with beating King, the opening of the film recreates the atmosphere of those troubled times by combining a dramatic reconstruction of the C.H.P. pursuit of King's car with original footage from George Holliday's grainy, black and white videotape of the beating itself. Later scenes, which exploit the growing tension as the city awaits the verdict from Simi Valley, include contemporary television film of the crowds of media surrounding the courthouse and the original news-helicopter shots of the brutal attack upon Reginald Denny at the junction of Florence and Normandie. Despite an impressive pedigree, with its original story by James Ellroy and its final screenplay by David Ayer of *Training Day* fame, and despite being the first feature film to dramatise the chaos in the streets of Los Angeles during the early stages of the riots, *Dark Blue* adds little to public understanding of the high-profile events of the early Nineties. Nevertheless, it is notable for providing the first filmic representations of the Special Investigations Section (S.I.S.), an L.A.P.D. unit which had become notorious for its use of deadly force.

¹⁴⁵ Chief Gates quoted in 'To Protect And To Serve', *Los Angeles Times*, 16 February 1989, p. 10.

Most of the leading characters in *Dark Blue* are members of the S.I.S., a brainchild of Chief Parker, created, in 1965, without public announcement and designed to remove dangerous criminals from the streets. Parker envisaged a squad of ‘professional witnesses’, whose surveillance activities would allow them to provide compelling testimony based on observations of crimes as they were committed. The new squad remained in the shadows for the first two decades of its existence and, according to comments made by its original commander, for many years its existence was not even apparent on the department’s organisation chart.¹⁴⁶ In 1988, after a series of articles in the *Los Angeles Times* revealed the unit’s history and the controversial nature of its operations, even Tom Bradley, who had completed a twenty-two year career in the L.A.P.D. before becoming Mayor in 1973, claimed that he was unaware of its existence.¹⁴⁷ Although, for much of the Nineties, S.I.S. activities were overshadowed by the higher-profile disasters which bedevilled the L.A.P.D. after the King beating, by the time that *Dark Blue* was released the conduct of the unit’s officers had become a significant issue in Los Angeles.

As a specialised unit within Robbery-Homicide, S.I.S. would typically work at the request of detectives who had identified a suspect in a serious crime but lacked sufficient evidence to make an arrest. Surveillance of known criminals is not in itself inherently controversial, but the tactics employed by S.I.S. made the operations of the unit a *cause célèbre*. Despite the requirement expressed in the L.A.P.D. manual for officers to protect ‘the right of all persons within its jurisdiction to be free from criminal attack, to be secure in their possessions and to live in peace’, the S.I.S. would routinely allow suspects under surveillance to commit their crimes before making arrests, an approach which resulted in

¹⁴⁶ David Freed, ‘Special Investigations Section: Watching Crime Happen’, *Los Angeles Times*, 25 September 1988, p. A1.

¹⁴⁷ ‘To Protect And To Serve’, p. 10.

some traumatic experiences for the victims. Captain Dennis A. Conte, an S.I.S. commander interviewed by the *Los Angeles Times* in 1988, made it clear that these tactics were designed to ensure that prosecutions would result in convictions which carried long prison sentences: ‘Public safety is certainly a concern, but we have to look beyond that because if we arrest someone for attempt, the likelihood of a conviction is not as great.’¹⁴⁸

If this unusual approach to law enforcement was potentially hazardous for the victims of crime, for the perpetrators it was frequently fatal. From 1978 to 1988, S.I.S. officers shot twenty-nine suspects, killing sixteen while, in the same period, the much-larger S.W.A.T. unit shot fifteen people, killing ten. An investigation of thirty-two S.I.S. shootings by David Freed of the *Los Angeles Times* concluded that, in twenty-eight instances, the suspects had not fired at the officers and that, in thirteen cases, the suspects had been unarmed.¹⁴⁹ The most infamous shootings occurred in 1990, when four armed men who were under S.I.S. surveillance broke into and robbed a McDonald’s franchise which had just closed for the evening. Although, in the minutes before the break-in, the restaurant manager had noticed suspicious activity outside the building and had placed an emergency call, the S.I.S. commander on the scene intervened to delay the arrival of patrol cars. His decision was subsequently defended by Chief Gates, who claimed that early intervention would have resulted in insufficient evidence for a successful prosecution.¹⁵⁰ After securing the combination to the safe by threatening the manager at gunpoint, the robbers left the building to be confronted by the S.I.S. who killed three and seriously wounded a fourth. Their relatives brought a civil prosecution, alleging that, contrary to the

¹⁴⁸ L.A.P.D. Manual and Captain Conte quoted in Freed, ‘Special Investigations Section’, p. A1.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 5.

¹⁵⁰ ‘Gates Testifies, Backs Cops Who Killed Robbery Suspects’, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 19 March 1992, p. A1.

police version of events, the robbers were unarmed, having placed their guns in the trunk of the car before the S.I.S began firing, and that ‘death-squad’ executions had taken place. In a trial which concluded a few weeks before the Rodney King verdict, the plaintiffs were awarded damages against individual officers and against Chief Daryl Gates.¹⁵¹

Public concern over the activities of the S.I.S. remained at a reasonably high level throughout the Nineties and into the early years of the twenty-first century. In a study of excessive use of force by North American police officers, Jerome Skolnick and James Fyfe included a section on the exploits of the S.I.S., concluding that, as an elite group of police officers targeting a criminalised segment of society which had no obvious supporters, the S.I.S. had simply made up their own rules for dealing with ‘bad people’.¹⁵² Between October 1988 and December 1992, almost two hundred S.I.S.-related articles appeared in the pages of the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Daily News*.¹⁵³ From 1995 to 2005, the *Los Angeles Times* published a further forty-nine articles on the S.I.S., including coverage of an F.B.I. investigation of the unit which began in 1999 and a fifty-million dollar federal suit which began in 2000, by which time the newspaper alleged that S.I.S officers had been responsible for at least thirty-four killings.¹⁵⁴ Within six months of the release of *Dark Blue*, the unit was involved in the killing of two suspects in Reseda, an event which led to a fundamental review of S.I.S activities and ultimately a curtailment of their propensity to

¹⁵¹ Michael Connelly and Jim Newton, ‘Gates, Special Unit Found Responsible for Robbers’ Deaths’, *Los Angeles Times*, 31 March 1992, p.1. (Michael Connelly subsequently wrote a series of novels, many of which are based on the exploits of fictional L.A.P.D. Detective Harry Bosch.)

¹⁵² Skolnick and Fyfe, *Above The Law*, p. 146.

¹⁵³ Frank Sacks, *Extreme Justice: The True Story of the L.A.P.D.’s Special Investigation Section* (New York: S.P.I Books, 2003), pp. 246-76.

¹⁵⁴ *Los Angeles Times*, collection of articles on S.I.S. found at <<http://articles.latimes.com/keyword/los-angeles-police-department-special-investigations-section/5>> on 5 December 2009.

resort to deadly force.¹⁵⁵ However, even in 2008, the reputation of the unit persuaded gun manufacturers Kimber to market an automatic pistol which had been originally designed to meet its requirements and which was branded ‘SIS’.¹⁵⁶

Although S.I.S. officers had previously been portrayed in Frank Sacks’ *Extreme Justice* (1992), that film’s failure to gain a theatrical release in the U.S. makes *Dark Blue* notable for providing the first cinematic representation of the unit.¹⁵⁷ However, presumably driven by his need to ensure a brisk dramatic pace, director Ron Shelton ignored the painstaking work of surveillance, which was the unit’s *raison d’être*, and chose instead to involve his cinematic officers in fast-moving investigative work. This understandable decision to prioritise entertainment-value over historical accuracy removed the opportunity for the film to engage with one significant topic of public concern: the well-publicised tension between the L.A.P.D.’s desire to ensure felony convictions and its obligation to protect the public. Despite this omission, *Dark Blue* does succeed in illustrating two other highly controversial contemporary issues: the reputation of the S.I.S. for vigilante justice and the lack of public accountability in the administration of L.A.P.D. shooting policy.

The dramatic structure of the film is built around the character of Detective Sergeant Eldon Perry (Kurt Russell), an S.I.S. veteran who is teamed up with Bobby Keough (Scott Speedman), a much younger newcomer to the unit who also happens to be the nephew of its senior officer, Jack Van Meter (Brendan Gleeson). In a complex plot, Van Meter orders Perry and Keough to investigate a multiple murder at a Korean grocery store

¹⁵⁵ Richard Winton and Andrew Blankstein, ‘Special Police Unit Is Under Review’, *Los Angeles Times*, 11 November 2003, p. B1.

¹⁵⁶ Richard Winton, ‘Pistol For Police Marketed To Public’, *Los Angeles Times*, 12 January 2008, p. B1.

¹⁵⁷ Sacks, who wrote the screenplay for the film, also published *Extreme Justice*, which included a novella based upon the screenplay and a short account of the unit’s history.

which Robbery-Homicide have failed to solve but deliberately puts them on the trail of a false suspect whom he hopes that Perry will kill. However, Perry manages to identify the real culprits as known informants of Van Meter himself, who had arranged the murders in order to mask the theft of a large sum of money from the store proprietor who was running an illegal book-making scheme. Realising that Perry has discovered the depths of his corruption, Van Meter organises an ambush which Perry survives, but which results in Keough's death. Perry, who has looked on Van Meter as a father figure, realises that his boss has only valued him as an agent of his own criminality and descends into self-loathing. After a period of soul searching, he decides to sacrifice his own career and freedom in order to bring Van Meter to justice. A self-incriminatory confession, made in melodramatic fashion at a ceremony which should have been a celebration of Perry's long-awaited promotion to Lieutenant, provides enough information to arrest Van Meter and leaves Perry himself facing a jail sentence.

Eldon Perry, whose father and grandfather were both L.A.P.D. officers, comes from 'a long line of gunfighters' and his teenage memories include his recollection of his father allowing him to use a squirrel-rifle to shoot at the Watts rioters in 1965. Unfortunately, Perry has developed a severely warped interpretation of the proper boundaries for police action and his zeal to rid the streets of 'bad guys' has persuaded him that any illegality, including murder, is acceptable if directed towards that end. In the words of critic Stanley Kauffman 'he has devised his own private moral code regarding the shooting of criminals.'¹⁵⁸ He admits to deliberate killings of suspects who should have been taken into custody and to planting false evidence and is, apparently, used to operating in a world where most of his police colleagues are either personally complicit in similar misdeeds or

¹⁵⁸ Stanley Kauffman, 'Dark Blue', *The New Republic*, 17 March 2003, p. 25.

willing to turn a blind eye. His ability to operate illegally is also assisted by other members of the justice system. He has a contact in the District Attorney's office who will issue warrants on the flimsiest of grounds in order to prevent Eldon circulating a video-tape of some of her youthful sexual indiscretions. His preferred judge will sign the warrants in a cocktail bar without bothering to read them and while keeping a Martini clasped in his other hand.

Perry's personal life comes close to cliché for a late-twentieth century cinematic detective: his alcohol dependency is increasingly obvious and, although he drinks his whisky neat, his tendency to treat his wife as an afterthought means that his marriage is on the rocks. He is saddened by her decision to leave him but seems to be even more upset to find that her new lover is a defence attorney and thus, in Perry's mind, an enemy of justice. Despite his obvious flaws, his character is capable of generating some kind of audience sympathy, partly because his misdeeds are motivated by a simple desire to get criminals off the street. In the words of Terence Rafferty: 'his corruption is not motivated by greed ... but by a kind of Wild West machismo'¹⁵⁹

By contrast, Jack Van Meter appears to be irredeemably evil, intent on lining his own pockets and willing to order the execution of anyone who gets in his way. Van Meter's nemesis is Deputy Chief Holland (Vingt Rhames), an African American uniformed officer and an almost impossibly noble character who is determined to curb the excesses of the S.I.S. Although Holland's professional record is unassailable, in a sub-plot Van Meter attempts to discredit him through photographs of a personal fall from grace: an affair, several years previously, with his assistant Beth Williamson (Michael Michele), a beautiful

¹⁵⁹ Terence Rafferty, 'Blood On The Badge', *GQ*, February 2003, p. 81.

young African American officer who has enjoyed a more recent romantic relationship with Bobby Keough.

Although *Dark Blue* completely ignores the role of the S.I.S. as surveillance specialists, its story hinges upon two fatal encounters between officers and suspects which leave its audience in no doubt that the unit is accustomed to doling out its own form of vigilante justice and which also demonstrate the weaknesses of the L.A.P.D.'s internal investigative processes. An early scene shows Perry and Keough being interviewed by a Shooting Board, the second stage in the compulsory review of any officer-involved shooting. Referring to an incident which is never shown on camera, Keough testifies that a suspect whom he shot and killed was brandishing a weapon and that he acted on the reasonable assumption that his own life, and that of other officers, was at risk. Although this account is supported by Perry, through later exposition we learn that it is a complete fabrication. Offered the opportunity to make his first kill as an S.I.S. officer, Keough had dropped his weapon and fled, leaving Perry to shoot the suspect and later to lie to investigators in order to save his young partner from disgrace in the eyes of his colleagues and superiors. Deputy Chief Holland, the only uniformed member of the review panel, is suspicious of the testimony but, lacking evidence, he is limited to attempting to discomfort Keough by suggesting that the shooting was a rite of passage: 'three weeks in the S.I.S. and you've made your first kill. Would you say you've proven yourself?' Despite Holland's obvious reference to the trigger-happy reputation of the S.I.S., the other board members, all white detectives, are much more supportive of Keough and, by a majority of four to one, confirm that the shooting was within policy. The impression of an old-boys network is reinforced when, immediately after the review, while Perry, Keough and Van Meter are relaxing with a drink, they are joined by one of the board members who gives them the

good news and joins in the celebrations. In the subsequent conversation it becomes clear that this individual is not only a close associate of Van Meter but knows Perry well and has fond memories of working with his father.

The second shooting incident is shown on screen and is a cold-blooded execution of an unarmed man which echoes the 'death squad' allegations made after the McDonald's shootings of 1990. During a raid which also involves a S.W.A.T. team, Keough accepts Perry's invitation to redeem himself for his earlier failure by shooting a suspect who has already surrendered, a shooting for which Perry plans to take responsibility. The events which surround this callous murder indicate an L.A.P.D. culture which is accustomed to this kind of event and which works smoothly to ensuring that the officer is cleared of responsibility. Perry has brought along an unmarked gun which he plants on the corpse to validate the shooting. Although the S.W.A.T. Commander who led the raid asks Perry in a jocular fashion about his personal tally of kills, he shows no curiosity to question the nature of the shooting and assures Perry that the paperwork will be fine. Keough then enters the first stage of the L.A.P.D. internal review process when he is interviewed as a witness by an Officer Involved Shooting Team (O.I.S.), whose members are obviously expert in ensuring that statements are couched in a way which ensures a successful outcome for the officer involved. As Keough is making his taped statement, any words which could lead to suspicions about the shooting are deleted and re-recorded to ensure that the finished tape is both plausible and consistent with other evidence.

The necessity for police officers involved in a shooting incident to be subject to internal scrutiny has frequently been represented in the cinema, while the L.A.P.D.'s internal procedures following such an incident have been referenced in several films, including *Colors*. However, *Dark Blue* is the first feature film to provide insights into the

inherent weaknesses of contemporary L.A.P.D. policies and procedures following a 'Categorical Use of Force' incident. Unlike the operations of the S.I.S., shooting policy was enshrined in the L.A.P.D. manual and had traditionally allowed officers to fire at a suspect only if they could reasonably conclude that lives were at risk, a policy which had become the subject of heated debate in January 1979, following the death of an African American woman. After a series of arguments with gas company officials over non-payment of a bill for twenty-two dollars and nine cents, Eulia Mae Love was shot twelve times by two L.A.P.D. officers who claimed that she was about to attack them by throwing a kitchen knife in their direction. Although Daryl Gates admitted publicly that this was a 'bad shooting' he nevertheless endorsed the results of the internal L.A.P.D. enquiry which determined that the shooting was within policy.¹⁶⁰ The resulting public outcry led to a revision in policy which not only required officers to believe that they were in personal danger but also stipulated a more considered approach to the discharge of multiple rounds. This revision also restricted circumstances in which the police were allowed to shoot at fleeing suspects, but re-confirmed their right to shoot at escaping felons, a proviso which covered most S.I.S. operations.¹⁶¹

Despite the uproar over the Love case and the subsequent modifications to the L.A.P.D.'s rules of engagement, the investigative procedure, which was a critical feature of shooting policy, remained unchanged until the end of the century. A five-step process began with an investigation by the O.I.S. which would determine whether or not a shooting was within policy and provide a detailed report to a Shooting Board, comprising five senior officers. They in turn would submit a recommendation to the Chief for approval, after

¹⁶⁰ Gates and Shah, *Chief*, pp. 227-30.

¹⁶¹ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, p. 94.

which his staff would produce a further report for the approval of the Police Commission, an independent civilian body charged with oversight of the L.A.P.D. Although this system appeared to have sufficient checks and balances, a considerable body of evidence suggests that, for many years, the procedure was heavily biased in favour of police officers and that civilian oversight was deliberately undermined. From 1973 to 1987, the O.I.S. was headed by Chuck Higbie, a legendary character who, in the words of Joe Domanick, was viewed by L.A.P.D. officers as ‘a kind of combination of St. Christopher and the Buddha.’ Higbie was notorious for consistently denying access to the scene of a shooting to any other interested agency, while his own team’s investigations of more than one thousand six hundred use-of-force incidents resulted in nine prosecutions and only three convictions, leading Domanick to accuse him of acting as ‘a protector of his officers and the department’.¹⁶² In the wake of the Eulia Love case, an article in the *Los Angeles Times* also accused Higbie of being excessively protective of officers and alleged that he used his influence with Chief Gates to hamper an initiative by the District Attorney to become more involved in investigations.¹⁶³

By the time that *Dark Blue* was released, although a number of procedural changes had been implemented, which were designed to make the process more transparent, shooting policy remained a contentious issue in civil discourse. Following the Consent Decree of 2000, which established Federal oversight from January 2001 onwards, the L.A.P.D. had modified its organisation to create two new bodies: a Force Investigation Division, which was obliged to offer full co-operation to the District Attorney’s office in its initial investigations, and a Use of Force Review Board, a group which was more broadly constituted than its predecessor. However, as late as 2004, an article in the *Los Angeles*

¹⁶² Domanick, *To Protect And To Serve*, pp. 270-71.

¹⁶³ Claire Spiegel, ‘Investigation of Eulia Mae Love Shooting—A Question Of Credibility’, *Los Angeles Times*, 8 May 1979, p. A3.

Times, which analysed incidents between 1986 and 2002, made it clear that civilian oversight of the L.A.P.D. was still relatively weak and that the Police Commission was often operating in the dark: 'The department's shooting reports routinely omit information that might cause the commission to question whether officers acted properly. Witnesses who told investigators that police fired without provocation have gone unmentioned. Physical evidence that contradicts an officer's claim of self-defense has been left out. ... In at least 28 shootings, 15 of them fatal, the commission ruled that the use of force was "in policy"—that is, reasonable and justified—without knowing about evidence that pointed to the opposite conclusion.' In the same edition, a separate article by the same team of journalists made it clear that Chief Bratton, who had succeeded Chief Parks in 2002, was in the process of reforming and renaming the unit with particular emphasis upon more rigorous investigation and more inclusive reporting of shooting incidents.¹⁶⁴

Although the dramatic reconstruction of the riots, the depictions of the S.I.S and the insights into Shooting Policy represent cinematic firsts, *Dark Blue*'s depictions of race and spatiality in Los Angeles follow more well-worn cinematic paths. It echoes *Boyz N the Hood* and *Training Day* in seeking credibility with younger audiences through its casting of rap musicians as criminals, in this case Kurupt and Master P. Its location-shooting provides the requisite authenticity but its inner-city street scenes do not provide any new perspectives on the city or its communities. Nevertheless, by setting its action against the background of the King beating and its aftermath, the film-makers provide an historical context for the racism which was ingrained in many L.A.P.D. officers at the time and which had been formally exposed by the report of the Christopher Commission in July 1991.

¹⁶⁴ Matt Lait and Scott Glover, 'Investigating Their Own', *Los Angeles Times*, 17 October 2001, p. A1 and 'A New Name And More Rigor,' *Los Angeles Times*, 17 October 2001, p. A24.

Eldon Perry's character provides a convincing portrait of a man influenced by long exposure to a pervasively racist environment. His conversation is peppered with remarks which indicate that his racism is casual and unthinking. His disdain for Holland leads him to express the wish that 'his black ass should be riding in a patrol car in South Central' while he describes the dash for freedom by an African American suspect as 'going Mandingo track-star'. Apart from its origin as the name of a West African ethnic group, Mandingo has entered common usage in the United States as a racial slur which is often associated with black male physical prowess. It acquired sexual connotations from *Mandingo* (1975), a film dealing with miscegenation on a slave plantation, which was described by Roger Ebert as 'racist trash'.¹⁶⁵ However, in a story which is overshadowed by the Rodney King incident, an audience in 2003 would be more likely to associate Perry's racism with that of Stacy Koon, the L.A.P.D. Sergeant charged with beating King. In well-publicised post-trial comments, Koon had claimed that, when he arrived at the scene, he believed that King's body-language when confronting C.H.P. Officer Melanie Singer had created in her mind 'fear of a Mandingo sexual encounter'.¹⁶⁶

Dark Blue also contains a more virulent form of racism, with Jack Van Meter living up to his generally evil disposition by calling Holland 'nigger' to his face. However, the film also suggests hope for the racial future of Los Angeles and its police force through its two principal black police officers. The involvement of Sergeant Beth Williams in a casual affair with Bobby Keough suggests a more tolerant racial future for future generations of the L.A.P.D. and, shortly before his death, the young, white officer turns to Williams to

¹⁶⁵ Roger Ebert, 'Mandingo', *Chicago Sun Times*, 25 July 1975, found at <<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19750725/REVIEWS/808289998/1023>> on 3 January 2009.

¹⁶⁶ Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, pp. 276-77.

confess his crimes and to provide a conduit to Deputy Chief Holland. Holland himself, although tempted by an offer to become Chief of Police in Cleveland, declares his commitment to the city and people of Los Angeles in a passionate speech at his local church. He is obviously positioned as the beacon of hope for the future, a putative Chief who will rid the force of the corruption of Van Meter and the racism and vigilante justice of Perry. In 1992, the appointment of Willie Williams, an African American, as Daryl Gates' successor had seemed to offer an opportunity for reconciliation between the L.A.P.D. and the minority communities of Los Angeles. Yet, by the time the film was released, the L.A.P.D. had experienced ten years of leadership from Williams and from another African American, his successor Bernard Parks. Both men had benefited from initial popular support, yet neither was able to demonstrate the qualities of leadership necessary to accomplish comprehensive reform and neither was retained beyond their first five year term of office.

Although Kathryn Bigelow deliberately invoked the spirit of the 1992 Los Angeles riots in her futuristic *Strange Days*, *Dark Blue* is, to date, the only Hollywood production to provide an historical reconstruction of the traumatic first day of the disturbances. Unfortunately, the impact of this carefully constructed background is diminished by staging an improbable police pursuit of suspects through the mob, while the notorious lack of response by the L.A.P.D. to the problems in the streets is trivialised by a closing scene which suggests that, even as the city burns, hundreds of officers are content to sit through an awards ceremony. Nevertheless, the film makes intelligent use of the entire Rodney King incident to dramatise Eldon Perry's descent into doubt and self-loathing as he realises that his life-long approach to policing has been built upon a false foundation. When Perry, a self-acknowledged racist vigilante, places his fate in the hands of Deputy Chief Holland,

an African American who is a stickler for the law, his surrender symbolises the significance of the King incident and is a strong cinematic indication of the need for change in the L.A.P.D.

Despite making extensive use of the King verdict and the riots, the film engages with issues of contemporary concern primarily through its depiction of the S.I.S., a portrayal which demonstrates both the strengths and the weaknesses of cinema's contribution to civil discourse. The unit's sinister approach to surveillance, which placed innocent victims at risk in order to make convictions more certain, is sacrificed to the needs of the entertainment. Nevertheless, the film offers its audience a dramatic interpretation of another highly controversial attribute of the S.I.S.: the propensity of its officers to kill their suspects. By screening a deliberate execution of an unarmed man who is trying to surrender, and by portraying the internal process through which shootings were investigated as fundamentally flawed, *Dark Blue* succeeds in making a fiction, which is set in 1992, relevant to discourses of law enforcement in Los Angeles at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

VI. Conclusion

From its detailed analysis of selected feature films, released between 1948 and 2003, this thesis posits their cinematic representations of the L.A.P.D. as significant contributors to discourses of law enforcement in Los Angeles. Throughout that period, while the films considered have engaged with a wide range of contemporary issues of law and order, the nature and extent of such engagement has changed substantially, influenced by the increasing racial and gendered diversity of film-makers, by their growing freedom to engage with the issues of the day and by the changing racial and spatial politics of Los Angeles.

Even in the 1940s and 1950s, when production was dominated by the Hollywood studio system and when content was constrained by the self-regulatory Production Code and by other, external pressures, Hollywood's *policiers* illustrated many issues which were the subject of popular concern or of official interest. In *He Walked By Night*, the portrayal of a psychotic killer reflected widely held fears surrounding the re-integration into society of the 'damaged veteran'. However, by illustrating the L.A.P.D. as early adopters of modern technology, in transport, communications and, especially, in forensic science, the film also reassured its audience of the increasingly professional nature of police work. In *Dragnet* (1954), representations of the L.A.P.D.'s Intelligence Division emphasised the importance which Chief Parker placed upon the fight against organised crime. As the Chief's cinematic voice, Joe Friday advocated a change in the law to allow the police to tap telephones and launched a general attack on the protections granted to suspected criminals by the Constitution of the United States.¹ Despite its heavily sanitised representations of

¹ Buntin, *L.A.Noir*, pp. 211-12.

police officers and its obvious partiality, a film sufficiently popular to rank number twelve in the U.S. box office chart was notable for its, very deliberate, engagement with a number of controversial contemporary issues.

In common with other police procedurals of the 1940s and 1950s, these Los Angeles-based examples of the genre completely ignored a central theme in the history of the city: the often-hostile relationship between its predominantly white police force and its minority communities. Local discourses of law enforcement have, of course, encompassed many other issues but none has attracted so much public interest or has had such serious implications for the city. Although the racial incidents of the 1940s and 1950s did not result in the levels of death and destruction which Los Angeles would suffer in the riots of 1965 and 1992, both the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943 and the Bloody Christmas incident of 1951 were controversial events which aroused much public debate. Despite this glaring absence, it is contended here that contemporary cinematic representations of the L.A.P.D. nevertheless made a meaningful contribution to discourses of law enforcement, albeit one which was limited to the issues which Hollywood deemed suitable for public consumption and was expressed from distinctly pro-police perspectives.

By the beginnings of the 1970s, in the United States in general and in Los Angeles in particular, societal and cultural changes had undermined the relevance of such reassuringly white views of the city, while the more liberal censorship regime of the M.P.A.A. rating system had made it easier for film-makers to address more sensitive issues. Although the majority of Los Angeles-based police movies produced in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s included some allusions to the highly raced nature of policing, it was the emergence of African American directors which provided the greatest impetus to change. Six years after the Watts riot, Melvin Van Peebles produced scathing representations of

white L.A.P.D. officers in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. While dramatising the general allegations of racism and brutality which minority communities had leveled against the police for many years, the film used the character of a young black activist to make reference to the well-publicised hostility between the L.A.P.D. and the Black Panthers. Five years later, Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* illustrated the same concerns in a filmic version of life in Watts. Despite identifying multiple agencies—the courts, the prisons and the welfare authorities—as persecutors of the black community, Gerima made L.A.P.D. officers his filmic icons of white oppression. Their catalogue of misdeeds went beyond predictable representations of racial profiling and excessive use of force to more symbolic and emotive crimes, notably the rape of a child and the beating of a pregnant woman who subsequently miscarried.

Meanwhile, through screen adaptations of the works of Joseph Wambaugh, Hollywood had begun to engage with a much wider range of issues, including the paramilitary ethos of the L.A.P.D., the challenges which it faced in enforcing laws governing sexual activity and the vulnerability of police officers to alcohol abuse, marital breakdown and suicidal tendencies. Despite approaching racial issues from a pro-police perspective, *The New Centurions* was the first mainstream movie to depict the tensions inherent in the presence of an aggressive, predominantly white police force in the 'chocolate city'. In *The Choirboys*, a portrayal of a white officer as a brutal racist can be read both as a direct cinematic precursor of the 1982 choke hold controversy and as an early illustration of an approach to policing which would shock the world in the infamous 1991 beating of Rodney King. The subject matter of *The Onion Field*, a dramatised reconstruction of the real-life murder of an L.A.P.D. detective, was entirely removed from the racial tensions of the inner city, even though one of the killers was African American. However, through its filmic

reconstruction of the case of Karl Hettinger, the film contributed to two separate strands of contemporary public discourse: the risks that police work carried to the psychological health of officers and the tortuous nature of the California justice system.

Throughout the fifty-five years covered by this thesis, each of the films selected has made its own identifiable contribution to civic discussions of law and order. However, the three years which separated the launch of Operation Hammer from the report of the Christopher Commission were remarkable for the release of two films, each of which, in its own right, became a central topic of discourses of law enforcement in Los Angeles. Dennis Hopper's *Colors* attracted a huge amount of public attention from the coincidence of its release with the launch of Operation Hammer. Despite being filmed from the viewpoint of white police officers, the film exposed many of the issues associated with gang-violence in both the Latino and African American communities of Los Angeles, while the conduct of one of its leading characters offered further filmic examples of racism and brutality by an L.A.P.D. officer. In the aftermath of the King beating, *Boyz N the Hood* emulated *Colors* in becoming the object of intense public scrutiny. John Singleton's film, which was also linked with gang conflict through its story, its setting, its advertising campaign and its associations with gangsta rap, was released amid justifiable fears that its screenings would provoke violence in local theatres. Released within a few days of the publication of the lengthy, but pivotal report, of the Christopher Commission, the movie needed only two brief scenes to illustrate many of the Commission's criticisms of the L.A.P.D. and to bring them to the attention of a much wider audience. Although *Boyz N the Hood* had been completed before the King beating took place, in the wake of that watershed event, its portrayal of police officers whose contemptuous treatment of black citizens included racial

profiling, combined with an obvious readiness to hand out rough treatment, resonated throughout Los Angeles.

Although separated by less than three years, these two films illustrate the impact of directorial diversity and of the changing racial and spatial politics of Los Angeles. While each is set in the troubled spaces of the inner city and each deals with the linked threats of gangs and drugs, their perspectives on policing reflect the differing points of view of two long-term residents of Los Angeles, one a white, middle-aged Hollywood veteran and the other a young African American, fresh out of film school. They also reflect the sharp fall in public support for the L.A.P.D., as the African American community's initial enthusiasm for firm action against gang-violence was undermined by the arrests of thousands of young black men, most of whom were not active gang members.

From 1992 to 2003, the reputation of the L.A.P.D. declined even further as the King beating was followed in quick succession by the riots of 1992, the O.J. Simpson trial of 1995 and the Rampart scandal of 1998. Hollywood seized upon the sensational nature of these events to produce more than thirty movies which included representations of L.A.P.D. officers. Of the films selected for detailed examination, each is obviously informed by these high-profile failures but each, nevertheless, engages with a wider range of contemporary issues. *Strange Days* is dominated by allusions to Rodney King and to the riots of 1992 but also acknowledges the increased significance of private security firms in local law enforcement. In *Training Day*, while the fictional Alonzo Harris is clearly modeled upon Rafael Perez, the corrupt officer at the heart of the Rampart scandal, the film attempts to question whether policing of the crime-ridden inner city can ever be truly effective while operating within legal boundaries. *Dark Blue*, a film set against the final stages of the Simi Valley trial and the first day of the 1992 riots, gives cinematic exposure to the S.I.S., a

controversial and secretive L.A.P.D. unit. Through its dramatisation of the lethal activities of this highly specialised group, the movie illustrates the weaknesses of L.A.P.D. shooting policy and the lack of rigour within internal investigations of shooting incidents. Each of these films reflects the tensions of the 1990s through illustrations of racial conflict. Each demonstrates the links between race and spatiality in Los Angeles through use of inner-city locations and each seeks authenticity in its portrayal of African Americans through the use of rap musicians, either as characters within its narrative, as cast members or as providers of the musical sound-track.

Many commentators have traced the roots of the embarrassments suffered by the L.A.P.D. in the 1990s to its failure to respond adequately to the needs of a rapidly changing, multi-national metropolis. This perceived weakness has been linked with the lasting influence of Chief Parker, who shaped the para-military model of policing which, for many years after his death, was maintained by the famous protégés who succeeded him. In 1992, the forced resignation of Chief Gates severed the last remaining connection between Parker and the higher echelons of the L.A.P.D. but, five years later, cinema audiences were given a vivid reminder of his formative role in the policing of the city. *L.A. Confidential* offers a cinematic reconstruction of the early-1950s, an age when contemporary representations of the L.A.P.D., on radio and television and in the cinema, had reflected Parker's preferred image of policing rather than its harsh realities. Within its narrative, the film uses *Badge Of Honour*, a television series which parodies *Dragnet*, to underline the contrast between the saintly image which the programme conferred on the filmic L.A.P.D. and the outrageous conduct of some of its officers. Unlike the feature film *Dragnet* (1954), *L.A. Confidential* was unconstrained, either by the limitations of the Production Code or by the influence of the L.A.P.D. and, perhaps just as importantly, its

audience was well aware of the recent examples of racism and brutality for which the L.A.P.D. had been universally reviled. Its portrayal of police corruption, racism and brutality not only exposed issues which had been off-limits to film-makers of the 1950s but did so in a way which audiences could relate to more recent L.A.P.D. controversies, such as the King beating and the trial of O.J. Simpson. A comparison of these two films underlines the significance of the changes which had occurred between 1954 and 1997: in cinematic freedom and diversity, in the racial and spatial composition of Los Angeles and in public attitudes towards the L.A.P.D. Despite the very different circumstances surrounding their production and their very different attitudes towards the police, each film can nevertheless claim, with some justification, that its representations of the L.A.P.D. made an identifiable contribution to contemporary discourses of law enforcement.

The release of more than thirty movies between 1992 and 2003 which included representations of L.A.P.D. officers suggests a number of possible areas for future research. One such opportunity comprises four films which, although similar in terms of subject matter, location and release dates, were created by a diverse group of directors. Edward James Olmos (*American Me*), the son of a Mexican immigrant father and a Mexican American mother, is a native of East Los Angeles. Gregory Nava (*My Family*) is a third-generation Californian who was born in San Diego but has Mexican heritage and family connections on both sides of the border. Allison Anders (*Mi Vida Loca*) was born and raised in rural Kentucky before relocating to Los Angeles while Taylor Hackford (*Blood In, Blood Out*), is a native Californian from Santa Barbara. Released within a period of three years and set in the traditional Mexican American barrios of East Los Angeles, each film explores aspects of that community and its relationships with crime, gang-culture and the criminal justice system. Despite these similarities, the variations in the ethnicity, gender

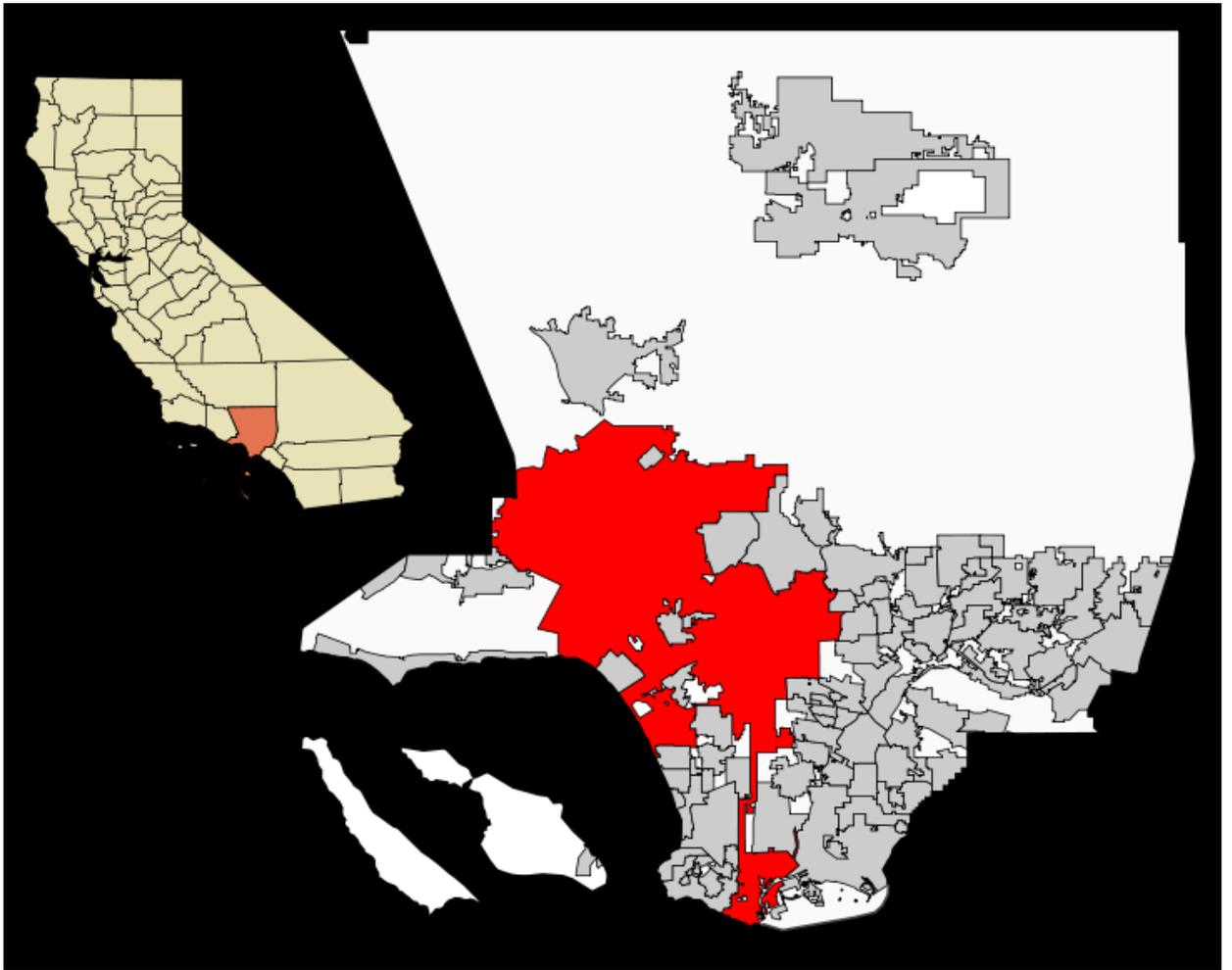
and upbringing of the four directors suggest the potential to explore the significance of this diversity in generating differing perspectives on the important issues involved.

In common with many other American police forces, for most of the twentieth century the L.A.P.D. was a para-military organisation, dominated by white men, many of whom had served in the armed forces. With the notable exception of Janice Appier's *Policing Women*, historical scholarship on the police in general and on the L.A.P.D. in particular reflects this male hegemony, while police movies have proven to be fertile ground for research into constructions of white masculinity, including the previously referenced works of Steven Cohan, Brian Baker, Susan Jeffords and Philippa Gates. Of the films considered within this thesis, only *Dragnet* (1954) and *Dark Blue* devote significant amounts of screen time to female officers. Despite the absence of a Los Angeles-based equivalent of Kathryn Bigelow's *Blue Steel*, in which Jamie Lee Curtis starred as an N.Y.P.D. officer, there are several films set in the city in which prominent characters are female officers. Laurie Metcalfe played a senior investigator in *Internal Affairs* (1990), Rene Russo co-starred with Mel Gibson and Danny Glover in *Lethal Weapon 3* (1992), while Rachel Ticotin played Detective Sandra Torrez in *Falling Down*. Although the material available is limited, it is possible to envisage future research which examines developments in cinematic representations of female officers throughout a period when women struggled to obtain equal opportunities, both within the film industry and within a traditionally male-dominated L.A.P.D.

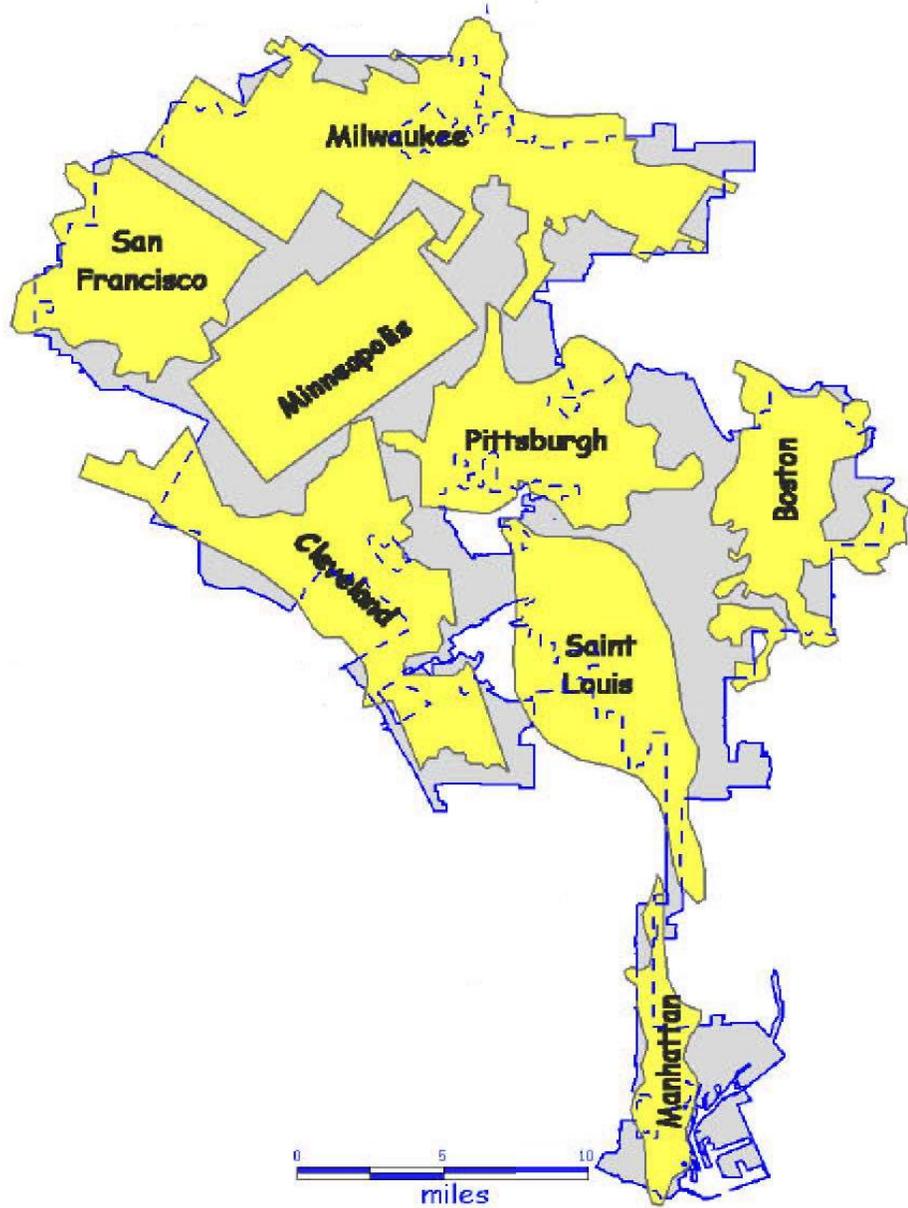
Appendix

Map 1

Los Angeles County: City of Los Angeles (red), other cities (grey), unincorporated areas (white).



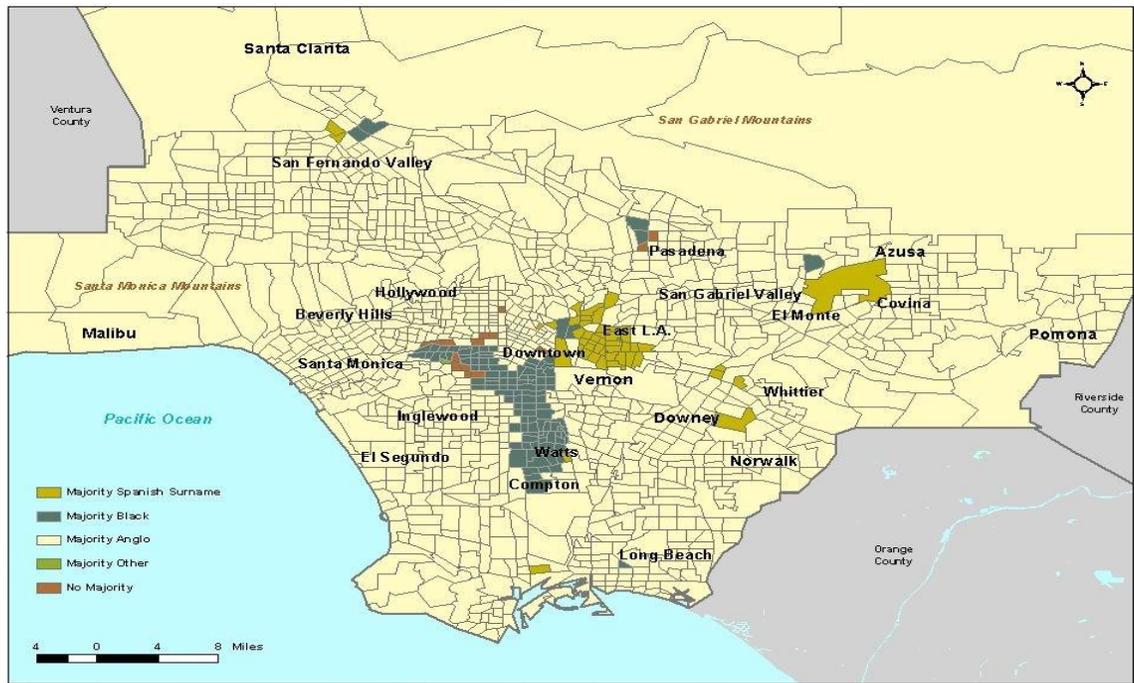
Map 2: Comparative size of City of Los Angeles ²



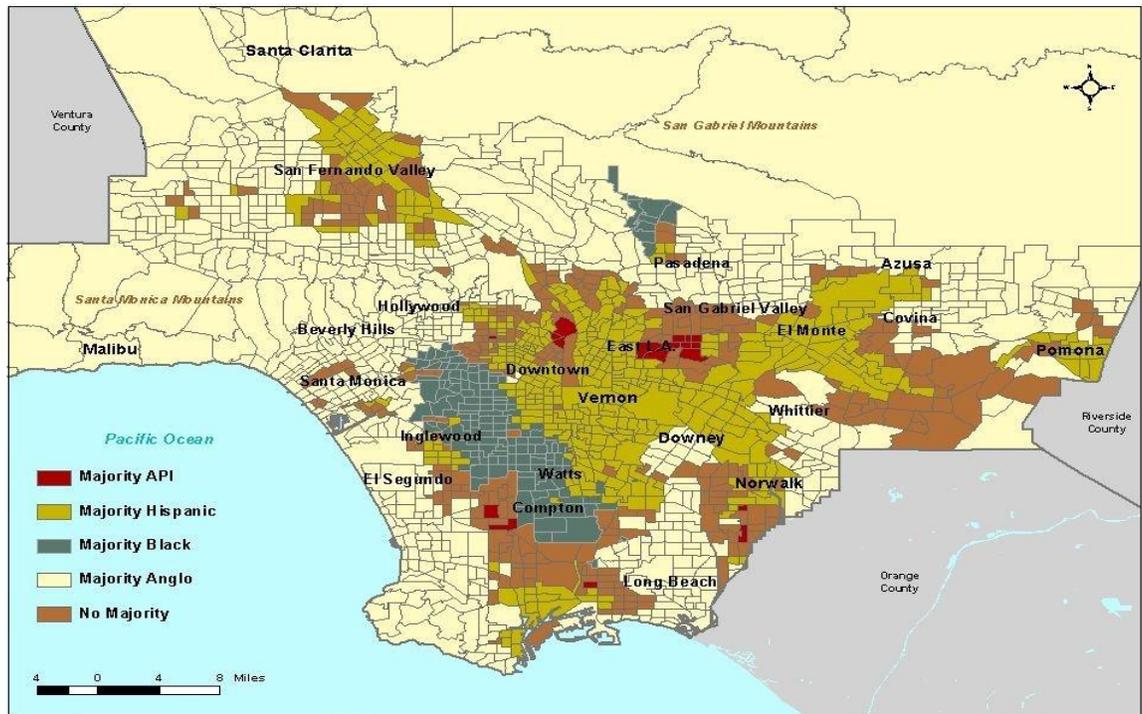
² Source: Neal Richman and Bill Pitkin, 'Urban Slums Report: The Case of Los Angeles U.S.A.' (UCLA Advanced Policy Institute), 2003. © 2011 The Regents of the University of California. All Rights Reserved.

Maps 3 and 4: race and space³

Los Angeles County: Racial/Ethnic Diversity 1960



Los Angeles County: Racial/Ethnic Diversity 1990



³ Source: UCLA Lewis Center.

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