

Boyz n The Hood (1991)

This is an updated version (mainly in the last half) of a review and guide published in VP over 20 years ago. We post it now because groups watching Straight Out of Compton might want to also discuss this, the first film in which Ice Cube was a star, and which depicts ghetto conditions against which N.W.A. was protesting.

Rated R. Running time: 1hour 52 min.

Our content rating (1-10): Violence 5; Language 6; Sex/Nudity 3.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.

Psalm 72:14 (A Psalm describing the ideal king, but what about the ideal cop—see Officer Coffey below?)

And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Ephesians 6:4

Themes:

Choosing between violence & non-violence, Effects of racism, Father-son relations, Sin, Where is God?

Director-writer John Singleton gives us a raw, unblinking look at the horror that too much of modern, urban America has become. If it ever was true, Katharine Lee Bates “alabaster cities” “undimmed by human tears” no longer is the case. Joining the grime and smog are the tears of those hurting, frustrated people who find it difficult, if not impossible, to cling to Dr. King’s dream of a raceless, classless nation.

With a wisdom beyond that of most twenty-three year olds, Singleton tells the story of three young men growing up in the battleground that South West Los Angeles has become.

The two half-brothers, Ricky (Morris Chestnut) and Doughboy (Ice Cube), live in an undisciplined home where their mother lavishes almost all of her love on Rick, who has a chance of escaping the ghetto if he can keep his grades up. Doughboy, the oldest and toughest of the three, has given up any hope. A school drop out, he has seen too many friends senselessly gunned down to believe that he can escape a similar fate.

Tre (Cuba Gooding) also lives in a single parent home, but it is different. When his mother feels that he is not listening to her, she hands him over to her former husband Furious Styles (Laurence Fishburne), mortgage broker whose office is a storefront.

He proves to be a father who has definite ideas about discipline and life goals—and who lives up to his name when it comes to discipline. A sample of his advice to Tre: “Any fool with a dick can make a baby, but only a real man can raise his children.” Furious also is well aware that it is the white man who holds power. He asks, “Why is it that there is a gun shop on almost every corner in this community?” The old man to whom he’s speaking says, “Why?” “I’ll tell you why.” Furious answers, “For the same reason that there is a liquor store on almost every corner in the black community. Why? They want us to kill ourselves.” Later he points out that it is the whites who bring in drugs in their planes and sell it to dealers in the hood.

The poisonous relationship between police and youth can be seen in the following exchange between when officer Coffey stops Trey, who says, “I didn’t do nothing. The cop snarls, “You think you tough?” He pulls out his gun. “Scared now, ain’t you? I like that. That’s why I took this job. I hate little m--rf—rs like you. Little niggers, you ain’t shit! I

could blow your head off with this Smith & Wesson and you couldn't do shit. Think you tough? What set you from? Look like one of them Crenshaw mafia m--rf--rs. " To make matters worse, Coffey is a black cop!

The sexism of the boys is frequently expressed, especially by Doughboy, who almost always refers to a girl as a "ho ". Shalika, one of the girls who hang out with the group calls him on this. "Why is it every time you talk about a female you gotta say bitch, ho, or hootchie?" His reply: "'Cause that's what you are."

I have explored this film with a number of audiences, telling them that John Singleton has given as much an entrée into ghetto life as we, with our white skins, can ever hope to gain. He shows us the downside of being black and consigned to South Central L.A., but also the humanity of he characters, some like Tre and Ricky who cling to their dream of breaking out of the hood by going to college--and others, like Doughboy who are trapped, destined to die with a short time from one of the many bullets fired each night by gang members. By showing the close relationship between Tre and his father, Singleton's film becomes a strong plea not only for peace and non-violence but also for African American men to offer themselves as strong, positive role models for their children.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. What scene impressed you the most? What about it made it so effective? The writing; acting; music; photography; directing?
2. What do you think of the setting of the story? What has happened in our cities that such conditions have developed? Furious Styles has his theory; what do you think of it? How did you feel during the early scene when the young boys see a dead body but go right on playing football? What has happened to them that they behave this way?

3. The film is rich in characters: Describe or tell what seems to motivate:

Ricky Baker

Furious Styles
Doughboy Baker
Styles

Reva

Tre Styles

Mrs. Baker

Brandi

4. What seems to be Furious Styles' philosophy of life? How does he attempt to pass this on to his son? What do you think of his methods? Compare this to the Baker household. What is lacking there?
5. In a parked car the three friends talk about some serious matters. How does this compare to the stereotype of ghetto youth? What do you think of Doughboy's comments about God? Can you blame him?
6. What do the police seem to contribute to life in the 'hood? Where is the irony in the scene when the boys are questioned by the two policemen? Why do you think the African-American cop acts as he does? Is this typical? Is this a good way to gain the cooperation of the people of the 'hood? (Those who have seen the film "Grand Canyon" might compare this scene with the one in which Simon's nephew is stopped by police in a "nice" neighborhood.)
7. How did you feel when Tre breaks under the strain of the constant sounds of violence and police surveillance and runs to Brandi for consolation? How does our environment affect or shape us? What does this say about the human need for fellowship and support? Where is the church, which claims to offer this, in this story? In the rural South the church usually did provide an environment of support through music, preaching and social activities that nurtured the members' self esteem, so continually under attack by the white-dominated society. What happened in the cities of the North to the church?
8. The story builds to its climax like a Greek tragedy; what irony do you see in the death of Ricky? And who is

it during that aftermath that seems to be the most sensitive and aware? (He is the one who rushes his younger brother out of the room before he can see too much of Ricky's bloody body.) Would you have expected this of him: and how does this make his despair and probable fate all the more tragic?

9. What do you see happening to Tre and Brandi? To Furious? Is there a danger that they will become so absorbed in their striving for "the good life" that they will forget their origins, or will their experiences contribute to a sense of concern for those they have left behind?
10. How do you feel after seeing and discussing this film? What does it have to say to African-Americans? To whites? What can be done about the South West Los Angeleses of America? (A good film to see as a follow-up to this is one already mentioned *Grand Canyon*, which deals with the malaise of both whites and African-Americans living in our cities.)
11. The 'hood" is harsh and unyielding; do you see grace anywhere in this story of violence and neglect? What word of hope might you express to Doughboy? Where do you see God in this story?
12. What is the racial situation where you live? How involved are you or your church in dealing with it, and with poverty? Talk with your pastor and other community leaders to see where you and your group might be of help – and even more, might learn first hand what young people like Tre and his friends must contend with. (One of the most memorable encounters my people and myself had was when we met in the home of a black church member in a public housing project and saw a little of the danger that she and her child were up against every day!)