CONSERVATIVE IMPLICATIONS OF THE IRRELEVANCE OF RACISM IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN CINEMA

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Historically, African American cinema has been used to illuminate the scourge of racism in American society. From Oscar Micheaux to Spike Lee, the struggle against racism has been a prominent theme in movies by and about African Americans. It is ironic that since the 1990s, when more Black filmmakers than ever before have reached prominence in Hollywood, race and racism have virtually ceased to be major themes, and the few films that do address racism have fared badly at the box office, even among young Blacks. Why has this occurred? There are several factors at work. One is the cautious nature of the film industry itself when it comes to controversial, socially conscious movies. But perhaps more important is a growing conservatism among some young Blacks and a growing despair among others that lead them to discount the relevance of confronting racism in contemporary society.

Keywords: African American; cinema; conservatism; ideology; film; filmmakers; motion picture; movie; race; racism; hip-hop generation

There was a time when the use of cinema proved a potent weapon for exposing the searing realities of racism in American society. From Oscar Micheaux to Spike Lee, racism has been a frequent theme in American film. In particular, from the late 1940s through the mid-1970s, such films as Home of the Brave, Pinky, No Way Out, The Defiant Ones, To Kill a Mockingbird, Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner, In the Heat of the Night, Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song, The Learning Tree, and Shaft tackled, in their own disparate ways, the scourge of racism. Once the civil rights
and Black power movements cooled, these films also ceased. However, in the late 1980s and early ’90s, young Black filmmakers such as Spike Lee and John Singleton once again addressed racism in films like *Do the Right Thing* and *Boyz N the Hood.*

Since the mid-1990s, however, there has been a shift in Black cinema. Fewer films, even Black-oriented films, address racism as a subject, and those that continue to do so fare poorly at the box office, even with young African American filmgoers. A younger generation of filmmakers has emerged, making films for young, hip, Black audiences, but without the sociopolitical content. Films like *Friday, Soul Food, Booty Call,* and *Barbershop* cater to young Blacks, without much reference to racism or, in the case of *Barbershop,* hold up the icons of the civil rights movement as objects of humor. Films like Spike Lee’s *Get On The Bus* and *Bamboozled* or John Singleton’s *Rosewood,* which continue to focus on racial issues, are box-office losers. This article will explore this recent phenomenon and seek to answer two sets of interrelated questions: First, why has this phenomenon occurred? Does it mean that younger African Americans no longer feel that racism is a potent issue? Second, does this recent irrelevance of racism in American cinema have wider political ramifications? Does the conservative argument that racism is no longer an issue in America open the door to greater political conservatism among young Blacks?

**RACE AND AMERICAN FILM: A BRIEF RETROSPECTIVE**

Race has been a feature in American film since the beginning of the film industry. In the early films made by White filmmakers, Blacks were generally stereotyped (as Donald Bogle has told us in his famous book of the same title) as “toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies, and bucks.” One of the earliest American films, for example, was entitled, *A Nigger in the Woodpile* (1904), in which Blacks were portrayed as shiftless thieves. The first film version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1903) featured a cakewalk sequence that had nothing to do with the preceding or following action in order to present the “dancing fool” image of Black people. Of course,
one of the most infamous portrayals of African Americans was in D. W. Griffith’s classic, *Birth of a Nation* (1915), in which Blacks were portrayed as ignorant buffoons or venal, sex-crazed brutes. For decades after *Birth of a Nation*, African Americans were either portrayed in stereotypical ways or not at all in American cinema (Leab, 1994; Reid, 1994).

African Americans have been involved in filmmaking since the early days of movies, and their films contrasted with the stereotypical depictions offered by their White counterparts. In the second decade of the 20th century, Black filmmakers like Will Foster and Noble and George Johnson were making motion pictures geared toward a Black audience, so-called “race films.” Many of these movies featured depictions of racism. For example, the Johnsons, through their production company Lincoln Motion Pictures, made *The Realization of a Negro’s Ambition* (1916), a Tuskegee esque movie of a young Black man who leaves the South to go make his fortune, battles several racist obstacles, and perseveres in the end. The preeminent Black filmmaker of the silent era, Oscar Micheaux, made films featuring unflinching looks at the brutality of racism, such as *The Brute* (1920), in which a Black man fights off a Southern lynch mob, and *Birthright* (1924), in which a Black Harvard graduate moves to a small Southern town and experiences racist violence. Thus, from the beginning, racism and its effects was a popular theme among African American filmmakers (Reid, 1994).

Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier as racist convicts chained together, symbolizing White and Black America’s shared plight. As the 1960s proceeded and the civil rights movement hit full stride, Hollywood made more movies dealing with racism and the African American experience: an adaptation of Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun* (1961), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), several movies starring the ubiquitous Sidney Poitier, notably *A Patch of Blue* (1965), *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), and *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967). Many of the mainstream Hollywood movies were criticized for their velvet glove handling of racism—noble White man to the rescue of saintly Black victim. The “saintly negro” charge was particularly leveled at Poitier, who many Black critics viewed as White America’s vision of what a Black man should be rather than a real flesh-and-blood man who was allowed to be angry or sensual (Bogle, 1999; Edelman, 1994). There were other films, however, like *Cool World* (1963), *Nothing But a Man* (1964), *Black Like Me* (1964), and *Dutchman* (1967), that had a harder edge. Many of these were independently produced films. However, be it mainstream Hollywood productions or edgier independent movies, filmmakers were showing a greater propensity to deal with racial issues (Bogle, 1999; Leab, 1994; Reid, 1994).

As the decade of the ’60s came to a close, with the clamorous sounds of “Black power” replacing those of “we shall overcome,” a new, tougher Black hero emerged. He was a no-nonsense guy who had no intention of trying to ingratiate himself to “Whitey.” This new Black hero was first embodied by ex-football star Jim Brown and in the early 1970s by a plethora of “blaxploitation” superheroes. The emergence of the Black superhero also coincided with the reemergence of the Black filmmaker (Leab, 1994).

Since the 1940s, Black filmmakers had been virtually absent from Hollywood. The last great Black filmmaker of the 1940s, Spencer Williams, finished his career ignominiously on television in the 1950s playing Andy in the *Amos and Andy Show*. However, in the late 1960s, a new crop of Black filmmakers appeared. In 1969, Gordon Parks became the first African American to direct a major studio-financed film when he brought his autobiographical
novel, *The Learning Tree* (1969), to the screen. In 1970, Ossie Davis directed *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. But, probably the most influential and controversial film of this time was Melvin Van Peebles’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971). It was the story of a Black pimp who, after he witnesses two White policemen brutalizing a Black youth, beats them up, smashing them in the face with their own handcuffs. He then flees, outwitting the White establishment along the way and having some steamy sexual adventures. Finally, he escapes across the Mexican border and the film ends with the message, “A BAADASSSSS NIGGER IS COMING BACK TO COLLECT SOME DUES.” It is clear that this was not a kindly Black saint designed to make White America feel better. Rob Edleman (1994) wrote that although some ’60s films had begun to grapple with the racial gulf between Whites and Blacks, no other film had “expressed the unadulterated anger and alienation that is a byproduct of racism as vividly as did Van Peebles in *Sweetback*” (p. 442). Most White critics, as well as some Black, hated the film for its glorification of violence and the unsavory aspects of inner-city life. Many also felt it was overtly racist toward Whites. Despite this, the film was wildly popular. Made on a budget of $500,000, it grossed $10 million. Donald Bogle (1999) wrote, “The fact that a black man met violence with violence and triumphed over the corrupt white establishment appealed not only to the mass black audience (particularly the young who flocked to see it) but to some white audiences as well” (p. 235). *Sweetback* launched the blaxploitation craze of the ’70s in which cool, tough, sexual Black men dispatched all comers and defied the White establishment at every turn. In the following years, *Shaft* (1971), directed by Gordon Parks, *Superfly* (1972), *The Legend of Nigger Charley* (1972), *Black Caesar* (1973), *Blacula* (1973), and a legion of other Black-oriented films were made by Hollywood. Black female superheroines got into the act with *Foxy Brown* (1974) and *Cleopatra Jones* (1973). These films made money, and thus Hollywood was interested in making them. The quality of the films deteriorated with the quantity.

However, these blaxploitation films did pave the way for higher-quality films depicting Black life in America. In the 1970s, such
praiseworthy and varied Black-oriented films as *Sounder* (1972), *Claudine* (1974), *Lady Sings the Blues* (1974), *The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings* (1976), and *Car Wash* (1976) were released. Out of the 1970s also came a crop of young independent Black filmmakers. Like the independent films of the 1960s, these movies were more likely to take harder, more complex, and grittier looks at African American life. In the ’70s and early ’80s, Haile Gerima directed *Child of Resistance* (1972) and *Bush Mama* (1976), Charles Burnett made *Killer of Sheep* (1977), and Julie Dash directed the short film *Illusions* (1983) (Bogle, 1999).

What the Black-oriented films of the ’60s and ’70s had in common (be they slick Hollywood productions or small independent films, be they blaxploitation crime dramas or family sagas, be they trenchant attacks on America or hopeful homilies to brotherhood) was a concern about racism. That concern might be prominent or more of a subtext, but racism, its effects on Black people, and how to overcome those effects were a definite theme. However, in the late ’70s and early ’80s, this theme diminished. The civil rights struggle was over. Black power was over. Racism receded from mainstream movies. There were Blacks in the movies, like Eddie Murphy, but they were funny men. With his jive, street-smart attitude, Murphy was unapologetically Black, but his films were not about race and he was not threatening to White America. Richard Pryor began as a powerful comic critic of American racism. But as he grew more popular in the ’80s, his films lost their militant edge, so much so that in *The Toy* (1983), Pryor is a plaything for a spoiled rich White kid.

Hollywood did make a few forays into the realm of racism in the 1980s, but these films were few in number, such as *A Soldier’s Story* (1984), *Brother From Another Planet* (1984), and the controversial *The Color Purple* (1985). However, later in that decade and in the early ’90s, racism reemerged as a prominent theme on the big screen. As before, the catalyst for this regeneration was young Black independent filmmakers, most notably Spike Lee.

In 1986, Spike Lee made *She’s Gotta Have It*, a film about the sexual adventures of a young professional Black woman and her varying array of lovers. This was an independent film, made on a shoestring budget, that the young film-school graduate scrapped together the money to make. It was a surprise success and
launched Spike Lee’s important and controversial career. Although
the film was a romantic comedy and was not directly about
racism, it was an unabashedly Black film. Even more so was
Lee’s next film, School Daze (1988), a film about life in a Black
college in which he explored the many things (such as skin color)
that divide Black people. It was a film about Black people for
Black people. Roger Ebert (1988) wrote in his review in the
Chicago Sun Times,

Spike Lee’s “School Daze” is the first movie in a long time where
the black characters seem to be relating to one another, instead of to
a hypothetical white audience. Lee’s “She’s Gotta Have It” was
another, and then you have to go back to films like “Sweet
Sweetback’s Badass Song” . . .

Ebert (1988) went on to say that most movies about Blacks “seem
acutely aware of white audiences, white value systems and the white
Hollywood establishment. . . . ‘School Daze’ couldn’t care less.”

However, it was Lee’s next film, Do the Right Thing (1989),
that established him as an auteur and helped to usher in a core of
young Black filmmakers. Do the Right Thing was the story of one
hot summer day in a Brooklyn neighborhood where racial ten-
sions boil over into violence. It was a raw, unflinching look at
racial tension. But Do the Right Thing was more than a film. It
was an event, a controversial film whose message and signifi-
cance was debated in newspapers, in magazines, and on televi-
sion. It was roundly criticized by some for what they saw as its
ambiguous attitude toward racial violence. Others praised it as a
bold, uncompromising look at American racism. However it was
viewed, it paved the way for a spate of Black-oriented films, many
made by young Black filmmakers walking through the door that
Spike Lee had pushed open. It brought race back as a major theme
in American cinema. David Bogle (1999) wrote,

Do the Right Thing fittingly closed the Reagan/Bush decades. For
it heralded the oncoming arrival of a new brand of African
American commercial cinema in which the subjects of race,
racism, cultural bearings and socio/political problems would move
to the forefront. (pp. 322-323)
In the late 1980s, mainstream Hollywood also rediscovered race, but again, many of these films were less about Black people and more about noble Whites and their travails. Films like *Cry Freedom* (1987) and *A Dry White Season* (1989), which dealt with apartheid in South Africa, centered more on the problems encountered by White South African opponents of apartheid. *Mississippi Burning* (1988) rewrote history, making the White FBI agents the heroes and reducing Blacks to passive victims. Hollywood was dealing with race, but it remained for Black filmmakers to incisively explore the subject.

From the late 1980s to mid '90s, a variety of films made by young Black filmmakers was released. In 1991, a staggering 19 films by Black filmmakers were released. Most of these films dealt in some way with race, racism, and the consequences of racism. Robert Townsend’s *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987) dealt comedically with racism and stereotyping in Hollywood. *Strictly Business* (1991) was a romantic comedy that touched on racism in the corporate world. Spike Lee returned with *Jungle Fever* (1991), a schizophrenic look at interracial romance and the ravages of drug abuse. Julie Dash explored the Gullah culture of South Carolina with *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). Melvin Van Peebles’s son, Mario, made the urban crime drama *New Jack City* (1991), which made Wesley Snipes a rising star. There was a group of gritty, urban, coming-of-age movies that dealt with the problems of gang violence, like *Straight Out of Brooklyn* (1991), *Hangin with the Homeboys* (1991), and *Boyz N the Hood* (1991). The best of these was John Singleton’s *Boyz N the Hood*, starring Cuba Gooding Jr., Laurence Fishburne, Ice Cube, and Morris Chestnut. Singleton won much critical praise and an Oscar nomination for the film, which spawned a flock of imitators. In the next few years, films such as *Menace II Society* (1993) and *Juice* (1992) plowed ground made fertile by the success of *Boyz*. These urban-youth dramas proved profitable for Hollywood, which ground them out, unconcerned about their decreasing quality. The films tended to give a one-dimensional view of Black life, but they did give new opportunities to young Black filmmakers. Thus, the 1990s became a fertile (although mixed quality) era for Black
cinema. This bounty of Black filmmaking continued throughout the ’90s, but the content of the films changed.

THE IRRELEVANCE OF RACISM

A variety of films pertaining to African Americans was produced throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century. Some of these films continued to deal with American racism. Spike Lee persisted in using racism as a theme. In 1992, his much-anticipated Malcolm X was released, and Lee continued to deal with racism in his documentary, 4 Little Girls (1997), which dealt with the bombing deaths of four Black girls in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. Get On the Bus (1996) was about the Million Man March, and Bamboozled (2000) was a brilliant satire on stereotypical depictions of Blacks on television. Even Lee’s Summer of Sam (1997), although it did not deal with African Americans, explored issues of intolerance and mob violence. John Singleton also continued to probe racial issues in Higher Learning (1995), which focused on racism on a predominately White college campus, and Rosewood (1997), a historical depiction of the destruction of a prosperous Black town by White racists in the early 1920s. Mainstream Hollywood also dealt intermittently with racial issues. Debbie Allen produced and Steven Spielberg directed Amistad (1997), about a slave-ship uprising. However, in typical Hollywood fashion, this film dealt as much with White efforts to help the slaves as with the slave uprising itself. In 1998, Oprah Winfrey brought Toni Morrison’s Beloved to the screen, directed by Oscar winner Jonathan Demme.

However, an increasing number of films about Blacks steered clear of race and racial controversy. Fewer films seemed to deal with racism, even Black-oriented films. Many films made by Black filmmakers were aimed at a younger Black audience, and these films were about love, partying, or violence, without much reference to race or racism. The Black urban dramas that flooded out after Boyz N the Hood did not seek to examine the underlying roots of the urban predicament, as Singleton had in Boyz. They
were made more for the purpose of thrilling than enlightening. Even the blaxploitation films of 20 years earlier had a subtext of antiracism, anti-White establishment to them. Many of these new urban dramas did not. As one Black critic (cited in Leab, 1994) put it, they merely served to “urbanize and to criminalize” (p. 49).

Other movies, like the House Party movies, Booty Call (1997), Brown Sugar (2002), the Friday series, Deliver Us From Eva (2003), Are We There Yet? (2005), and Diary of a Mad Black Woman (2005), were light entertainment made for and about Blacks but not about race or race relations. Some were serious family dramas, like Soul Food (1997), Love and Basketball (2000), and Down in the Delta (1998), but they did not deal in any serious way with racism. Moreover, those films that continued to deal with racial issues struggled at the box office, even among young Blacks. For all of its advance publicity, Malcolm X only did moderately well at the box office. Nelson George (1994) wrote,

> Despite Spike’s amazing publicity campaign and very public struggle for control of the film with its domestic distributor, Warner Bros., Malcolm X as event . . . doesn’t catch fire. Its nearly $50 million domestic gross is even less than the Wesley Snipes action flick Passenger 57. (p. 130)

And the film did not do well with the young Black audience, despite all the X caps merchandised in association with the film. Rosewood, despite generally positive reviews, only grossed $19 million. Neither Spike Lee’s Get on the Bus nor his Bamboozled drew large audiences, even among African Americans. Despite their big-name producers and directors, both Amistad and Beloved underperformed at the box office. And more recently, the movie Barbershop (2002), a comedy about a family-owned barbershop in the Black community, caused a stir when one of the barbers trashed Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson, and Rosa Parks for comedic effect, prompting Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton to call for a boycott of the film. Bringing Down the House (2003), coproduced and starring Queen Latifah, did very well at the box office but its main thrust was comedy, not social commentary. To the extent that race played a part in the film, it was a comedic device. Denzel
Washington’s *Antwone Fisher* (2002) was a wonderful movie that, in part, dealt with the indirect effects of racism on Black people’s treatment of each other. However, despite good reviews and a big name star/director fresh off an Oscar-winning year, it was not a huge box-office success either.

How do we explain this? Is racism no longer a relevant subject, even among young Blacks? Are young Blacks so far removed from the racial travails of our past that they are no longer interested or, worse, demeaning of those travails and those who worked to alleviate them? And if this is true, does this make young Blacks more susceptible to conservative ideology, which postulates the irrelevancy of racism? Or are there other factors at work that account for the disappearance of racism from American film?

**RACE AND CONSERVATISM**

Conservatism is an ideology that emphasizes tradition, community, slow change, the naturalness of hierarchy, the importance of order, and the imperfection of human beings. In the United States, this has meant a belief in laissez-faire, decentralized government that is active in the maintenance of order or the policing of morality but is not active in the economic sphere. American conservatives are generally critical of many social welfare policies and were often critical of federal government efforts to enforce racial justice, believing that change should be slow, tradition should be revered, and racial justice could be better attained by private or state government rather than federal action. The conservative resurgence in America over the past three decades has benefited from conservative opposition to such racially charged issues as affirmative action, welfare, busing for the purposes of school integration, and being “soft” on crime. Recent conservatives, Black and White, such as Thomas Sowell (1975), James Q. Wilson (1983), Charles Murray (1984), Thernstrom and Thernstrom (1997), and others, have argued that White racism is no longer a factor inhibiting Black achievement in American society. Behavioral or cultural variables are what hinder African Americans—drug abuse, criminality, teenage pregnancies, and so on. Federal government intervention has further exacerbated
the problem by making Blacks lazy and dependent and creating in them a sense of entitlement. The civil rights movement is over. It was victorious in eliminating White-imposed barriers to racial equality. However, conservatives did little to attain this victory, and in many instances they sought to obstruct it; nevertheless, conservatives argue that Blacks need to recognize that racism has been vanquished as a meaningful impediment to Black achievement. Blacks need to take the initiative themselves to improve, not depend on, federal affirmative action or other government programs (see Puddington, 1991). Thus, the positions of conservatives are that race is irrelevant and that other, individual rather than systemic, factors hinder African Americans. As progressive Black scholars have pointed out, this view is overly simplistic and is substantiated by debatable empirical evidence (see West, 1993). Moreover, it perpetuates racism by ignoring it. Nevertheless, is this conservative attitude one that young Blacks are adopting and are we seeing that reflected in their film choices?

WHAT'S GOING ON?

There is little doubt that young Blacks are becoming more conservative and less wedded to traditional civil rights groups as compared with their elders. A survey done a few years ago by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies and Home Box Office found that one third of African Americans identified themselves as conservatives; this was the case with younger Blacks, in particular (Issues of Democracy, 2000). Another study by the Joint Center found that young Black elected officials were more likely to be conservative than older elected officials and that they were less likely than their seniors to belong to a civil rights organization (Issues of Democracy, 2000). Thus, some of the evidence does indicate a greater propensity among young Blacks to be conservative, which could have an effect on the films they watch. Moreover, many of the popular recent Black films actually have conservative themes. Films such as Soul Food, Down in the Delta, and Barbershop have some conservative underlying themes—tradition and the importance of family and community.
Yet, it is possible to go too far in this assertion. David Bositis, who conducted the Joint Center survey, said that one should not read too much into his findings. He said that people can hold both liberal and conservative views depending on the issue (Issues of Democracy, 2000):

The fact that one-third of African Americans identify themselves as conservative does not mean they are conservative on all issues. In fact, a breakdown of the data indicates that, on most issues, even African Americans who identify themselves as conservatives are, in fact, still mostly liberal.

Moreover, there could be other reasons that young Blacks have not been interested in the films in question, reasons that have little to do with their depiction of White racism. For example, both Malcolm X and Rosewood were long movies running over 2 hours. Nelson George (1994) wrote,

The crucial flaw of Spike Lee’s Malcolm X is not of artistry but of time. Its three-hour-twenty-one-minute length, while not unusual for contemporary epics . . . has an adverse effect on the film’s ability to attract the young African American audiences thought to be prime targets of Malcolm-mania. (p. 130)

Furthermore, on the supply side of the phenomenon, part of the problem could lie in the Hollywood system itself. Hollywood has never been crazy about making message movies—thus, the famous adage from Samuel Goldwyn, “If you want to send a message, use Western Union.” Ernest Giglio (2000) has argued that Hollywood has often steered away from sociopolitical movies because they fear they are box-office poison. Michael Parenti (1992) argued that Hollywood sometimes gives less backing to films for ideological reasons. He wrote,

Films that deviate from the mainstream political credo can be produced if there is the promise of profit, but they usually have to be toned down, rewritten, larded with stars in order to get funded, as was the case with Missing (1982). Once made, they are usually accorded limited publicity and distribution, as was true of 1900 (1977) and Reds (1981). (p. 185)
Thus, Rosewood, a film quite critical of America’s racist past, was shown on approximately 900 screens nationwide, whereas Fifth Element, Air Force One, Dante’s Peak, and Contact, all made that same year, were shown on at least 1,900 screens (http://www.IMDb.com).

Rosewood did not get the support that other films received. But, one could argue, these other films had big stars—Bruce Willis, Harrison Ford, Pierce Brosnan, and Jodie Foster, respectively. That was why they got wider distribution. However, a film like Booty Call, also made in 1997, which did not have stars of the magnitude of Bruce Willis et al., also got greater distribution than Rosewood. It was shown on 1,272 screens, 281 more than Rosewood (http://www.IMDb.com). Thus, as Time Magazine writer Christopher John Farley (1997) put it, when it comes to Black cinema, “Hollywood is often cool to film concepts that don’t include pimps, drive-bys, sexual antics, or preferably, all three” (p. 87). As in the past, one is more likely to see incisive treatments of racism not in Hollywood productions but in independent films or, recently, on cable television.

Another possible explanation for the recent absence of racism in Black film can be gleaned from Bikari Kitwana’s (2002) book, The Hip Hop Generation, Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture. As mentioned earlier, aside from Boyz N the Hood, few of the urban dramas of the ’90s attacked American racism as a cause of the violence and degeneration of the inner cities. Kitwana describes the urban dramas of the ’90s, such as the Hughes brothers’ Menace II Society and Mario Van Peebles’s New Jack City, as nihilistic films, films inhabited by brutal, amoral characters out only for themselves. They are films that depict the hopelessness of young African Americans in America’s inner cities. It is a world created by American racism. It is immutable and inescapable. All that is left for the inhabitants of this Hobbesian existence is to survive. They cannot change it; they cannot transcend it. Thus, for them, racism is an unalterable reality—it is a given. Why, then, waste time depicting it? All that is left is to play out the hand dealt by a racist system. Political or social activism is impotent—why depict them? Why encourage them? What is important is survival. Racism is irrelevant not because it no longer exists, as the conservatives argue, but because it is unbeatable. With all the “victories” of the civil rights movement, White racism still exists in the United States.
For the hip-hop generation, the civil rights movement of the 1960s was inconsequential. It did not end racism. It was of another age, alien to their own. According to Bikari Kitwana (2002),

Ours is a generation that has birthed itself. In this view; the new Black youth culture is a complete breakaway culture... the old arguments of integration versus separation no longer apply. In fact, most Black gangster films pretend that the historic struggle between integration and separation is resolved in our generation... In this context, only street culture (hustlers, pimps, playas, bitches, and hos) evolved, not the social activist element. (pp. 134-135)

Considering such an attitude toward the civil rights movement, it is not surprising that young Black filmmakers would feel free to make its leaders objects of humor, as in *Barbershop*.1

**CONCLUSION**

So, fewer Black-oriented films are dealing with race or racism as a major theme, and many of those that do are not faring well at the box office. There are many possible explanations for this development—the films themselves or the way Hollywood markets these films. However, it could mean that young Blacks, who make up the bulk of the target audience for these films, see racism as an anachronism. This could indicate greater conservatism among young Blacks, something that is borne out in some surveys. As conservatives, these young African Americans might accept the view of conservative thinkers that racism has been vanquished and is no longer culpable for the degraded plight of Black people. Alternatively, they could accept a bleaker, nihilistic view that racism is an impermeable given and thus irrelevant to their current condition. In this view, what is important is to survive as best as possible in the world that racism has created, not wasting time and effort vainly trying to destroy racism. Either way, the result is the same—victory for the political right. Whether young Blacks accept the conservative mantra that racism has been vanquished or they surrender, give up social activism, and turn inward, concluding that racism cannot be defeated, they provide fertile ground for conservatism to grow and racism to flourish.
NOTE

1. However, it should be added that in the film, the barber who made the disparaging comments about Dr. King, Rosa Parks, and Jesse Jackson was a real “character,” and his comments were roundly criticized by the others in the barbershop.

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