6-21-1987

"Street Cop" is not Street-Smart

Kirk A. Johnson
University of Massachusetts Boston

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Available at: http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol1/iss2/7

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While this analysis may explain what is happening in these two films, it does not tell us why the intruders are blacks in disguise. These two films were produced over sixty years after the notoriously anti-black Birth of a Nation. In the 1910s the white movie-making community and its audiences could easily rationalize and applaud a film in which white heroes aggressively pursue a supposed undeserving but doggedly usurping black population. In the 1980s the white film-making community and its audiences ostensibly accept the black man’s right to share in America’s wealth. Perhaps the impulse to assign black characteristics to other worldly creatures reflects a subconscious belief that blacks are still intruders whose demands for equality have escalated into a desire for dominance. Seymour and Billy start out trying to treat Audrey II and the gremlins fairly, but the ungrateful creatures don’t want to stay in their place—they want control over their former masters and their women. Until they have rid their worlds of these menaces, the white heroes cannot truly be men.

Gremlins and Little Shop of Horrors are very likeable films. The former is rather charming, and the latter is one of the most originally-rendered musicals ever produced. Indeed, it is the positive surface of the films that makes their underlying message so insidious. Fortunately, the final twist common to both films can give solace to the viewer who would like to see the disguised blacks triumph. At the end of Gremlins the original Mogwi is still alive, albeit back in the capable hands of the mysterious Chinese man, and Little Shop closes as the camera follows Seymour and Audrey into the yard of a model suburban home and then pans from their happy faces to the garden where a seemingly nondescript little Audrey II is nestled in among the blooming flowers. Temporarily subdued by the white heroes, the blacks in disguise might triumph in the future.

Patricia A. Turner, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Black Studies at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. She is a specialist in African American Folklore.

Television Images: Some Observations on Street Cop

Printed below are two commentaries on a “Frontline” documentary, “Street Cop,” which was shown on national television in the Spring of 1987. Both were written for publication in the major Boston daily press; however, neither was accepted and printed. They are printed here to illustrate the concern that many blacks have for potential stereotyping by the media.

“Street Cop” is not Street-Smart
by Kirk A. Johnson

The next time a person of color falls victim to a racially motivated assault, do not be surprised. Tonight at 9:00, Boston’s struggle for racial harmony will be set back a notch. And it will come at the hands of one of the most celebrated television programs in the history of broadcasting.

“Frontline,” the award-winning WGBH-TV series, is airing a nationally televised special on the war against street drugs. The show, called “Street Cop,” takes viewers to Boston’s inner city for fifty minutes of heart-pumping violence. We see the police take a sledgehammer to an apartment door in search of drugs as the women and children inside scream in wide-eyed terror. We watch police officers wrestle a young man to the pavement over a suspected drug deal, and we feel the tension mount during a domestic argument until in the confusion a woman is arrested for throwing what an officer thought was a stone. Later, it turns out to have been a shoe. If war is hell, “Street Cop” says that life in Roxbury cannot be far behind.

As a documentary, “Street Cop” is riveting. But underneath the action lie troubling unspoken messages and sins of omission:

• The premise of the show—that to find drug abuse, one must go to the inner city—is flawed. Drug abuse is widespread, though it is often perceived—and portrayed by the news media—as an exclusively inner-city problem.
• Virtually every black and Hispanic face on the show, with the exception of a handful of police officers, is caught up in drugs or domestic violence. “Street Cop” feeds the stereotype that all inner-city residents fit this description—a stereotype as false as the notion that all suburbs are placid enclaves of domestic bliss.

• Little of what we see is put in a meaningful context. The racism and elitism that contribute to poverty and drug use go virtually unmentioned. Drug abuse is portrayed as a problem of minorities, while in reality, the people who use drugs are merely the most visible manifestation of a huge, white-controlled industry that reaches to the rain forests of South America and the poppy fields of the Near East.

• Though the scenes in “Street Cop” are undeniably real, they are a reality as seen from a single perspective: a police unit. Roxbury has its own equally valid perspective on drugs. Had an effort been made to tell the community’s story, viewers might have learned about ongoing efforts to cooperate with police, to help addicts give up drugs, and to encourage youngsters to stay straight.

The show’s most distressing message is that minorities deserve to be abused. “Street Cop” shows police officers dealing with Roxbury residents in ways that would be inconceivable in Newton or Ipswich. For those white Bostonians who are already fixated on hateful stereotypes, the show sends the tacit message that abusing minorities is okay. After all, the police do it.
“Frontline” has produced a number of programs that challenge racial stereotypes, for which WGBH deserves praise. But these will not undo the harm of this show. Boston already has a national reputation for racial intolerance. As one black woman told the Boston Globe several years ago, “People think this is the South Africa of America.”

Anyone watching “Street Cop” would be inclined to agree.

Kirk A. Johnson is a media analyst and research associate at the William Monroe Trotter Institute, University of Massachusetts, Boston.

**Editor:**

Many people in the black community (I among them) strongly object to the “Frontline” documentary, “Street Cop,” which was shown on Channel 2 on March 31. But I have even stronger objections to Ed Siegel’s review of “Street Cop,” which commends the show as “street smart” and dismisses all the serious criticisms of the show from the black community as “not convincing.” I am not exactly sure why “street smart” has such a sterling quality for Siegel, but it is disturbing that such a criterion would take precedent over the criticisms that the program stereotypes blacks and Hispanics and misrepresents and exploits an entire community.

Siegel strains very hard to justify “Street Cop” on the grounds that it “makes unmistakably clear that poverty and racism are the major villains in Roxbury.” Did Siegel watch the same program that I did? I saw a program that showed Roxbury as a monolithic entity, overrun by drugs and drug dealers and victimized by its own violence. I saw numerous scenes of drug dealers trying to outwit “the law” and one scene of a mob of screaming, hostile, potentially violent people being subdued by police officers. Although the overwhelming majority of folks in Roxbury hate and fear drugs as much, and probably more, than folks in other communities, not a single one of these hard-working, non-violent people was shown. To Siegel’s credit, he is able to read and interpret beyond the images that were shown in “Street Cop” and to conclude that the police in many ways create and encourage violence and victimize people who are poor and defenseless; but these are conclusions that require a clear understanding of how racism and poverty work. Such an analysis was not in the structure, nor in the language, nor in the images of “Street Cop.”

The tendency when watching the police (our symbols of law and justice) with the television camera obviously allied to and sympathetic to their point of view (the camera is following them and is in the back of their car) is to see the police as heroes and the people they are contending with as criminals and wrongdoers. Even when a white detective makes a slur against Afro-Americans (“It’s no bargain being black,” says Sgt. Philbin), the tendency is to understand his point of view: Siegel says that Philbin’s comment might be condescending and racist (it is), but what he really meant was that “when a society limits the legal opportunities for advancement, then that society shouldn’t be shocked at illegal activities.” Unfortunately, Mr. Siegel, “Frontline” did not provide subtitles with intelligent analysis. What we got on “Street Cop” were instant visceral images: the good cops in the land of the vicious.

Finally, Siegel’s insistence on the remarkable similarity between “Street Cop” and “Hill Street Blues” points out the vacuity of both the show and his review. The people and the problems of Roxbury made for good television — something to shock, titillate, and entertain. If there was any redeeming value to this show, it was the panel discussion afterwards and the followup on the “Ten O’Clock News,” which tried to bring some political consciousness to bear on the intervention of media technology into a community not powerful enough to prevent itself from being misused. We all know that weekly television dramas like “Hill Street Blues,” with one hour to get their Nielsen ratings, use all kinds of manipulative devices to get a quick response; so any identification between “Street Cop” and “Hill Street Blues” is cause for alarm, not praise. Television works in powerfully primitive ways. It can show us shapes of darkness and terror and teach us to fear the other who is not like ourselves. Making the entire community of Roxbury into “The Other” was the single effect and the singular accomplishment of “Street Cop.”

Mary Helen Washington
Associate Professor of English
UMass/Boston