THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN THE US CAPITAL

Smaranda ŞTEFANOVICI[1]

Abstract

The paper focuses on the grim realities of black criminality in D.C. ghettoes. The two films chosen, *Slam* (1998) and *Streetwise* (1998) provide a portrayal of Washington as a 'murder capital' of the US in the 1990s. The analysis will highlight the devastating effects of the crack cocaine consumption and commerce especially within the African American communities who try to overcome poverty by taking part in the thriving business of drug dealing. The films also highlight this urban black youth's talent and passion for poetry and music that, although hampered by their social background, are practiced by them as their means of survival.

Keywords: Washington D.C., film, African-American, urban decay, survival

Many American authors and screenwriters have shown great interest in American cities and chose them as a primary setting for their writings. Cities as cultural icons, as physical but also spiritual centers of development and fulfillment or cities as atrocious sites have been analyzed through the interaction among ethnography, literature, film, and culture. Cultural anthropology studies the city as a locus of cultural contact. Lehan also views the rise of the city as "inseparable from various kinds of literary movements – in particular, the development of the novel and subsequent narrative modes" (3)

Washington DC, the capital of US is a place where security is highly preserved and enforced, a place of iconic buildings symbols, a place famous for its historic sites, a place with a lot of famous landmarks and beautiful landscapes, making it a great location to film movies in. The films chosen for analysis will be analyzed by means of the ethnographic and anthropological methods in order to get a picture of the social, racial, and sexual stratification tendencies in the American capital, with special attention paid to the Afro-American immigrants' life and status in the American capital by contrast with the opulence of the White House residents and political leaders. According to Mc Keown, "urban literature is defined as much by the experience of the characters as by the presence of the city." (1). Hence, the city is influenced and impacts actions and characters. While some films present urbanization and, implicitly, Washington as a site of love, worship, blissfulness, growth, and fulfillment of the American Dream, for others it is a site of murder, war, decay, violence, and criminality.

The present research uses films as a lens to explore and interpret various aspects of the urban experience of young African-Americans in the US capital during the late 1980s and the early 1990s. The paper actually examines two old films (1998) shot in Washington, D.C. under the lens of cultural attitudes and perspectives about drug dealers, urban decay and individual means to cope with the despair and poverty of the Afro-

[1] Associate Professor, PhD, "Petru Maior" University of Tîrgu Mureş.
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American neighborhoods and surroundings. Washington is seen as a city that imprisons both body and soul, in which black characters recur to verbal talent, poetry and music as means to reduce the negative effects of violence and drug dealing.

Both films, *Slam* and *Streetwise* were released in 1998, and give a realistic image of the so called 'crack epidemic' era in the US during the late 1980s and the early 1990s. That period of time was characterized by a significant increase in the use of crack heroine in the major cities of the US. The films offer a stark contrast to the typical DC films depicting gang life, violence, drugs, and poor living conditions for the predominantly African-American areas of the American capital. They are emotional pleas about black males who are swallowed up by the capital's criminal justice system.

Crack cocaine first appeared in Miami, where Caribbean immigrants taught adolescents the technique of converting powdered cocaine into crack. The method was to dissolve cocaine hydrochloride into water with sodium bicarbonate (baking soda), which precipitated solid masses of cocaine crystals. Unlike powder cocaine, crack was easier to develop, more cost efficient to produce and cheaper to buy, which made it more economically accessible. The teenagers eventually introduced the business of producing and distributing crack cocaine into other major cities of the US, including New York City, Detroit, and Los Angeles. The crack epidemic had particularly devastating effects within the African-American communities of the inner cities by causing the increase of addictions, deaths, and drug-related crimes.[2]

The policies of DC mayor, Marion Berry, also contributed to the rise of drug abuse in the country's capital. He was considered one of the most powerful local politicians of his generation, a national symbol of self-governance, and home rule for urban blacks. He served as a Democratic mayor of Washington, DC from 1979 until 1991, when he was forced to leave office during his third term as a result of his arrest and conviction on drug charges, but was later elected again in the DC council and ultimately in the mayoralty, serving a fourth term from 1995 until 1999. His arrest came at a time when the mayor seemed increasingly confident about his political future due to his aggressiveness on the issue of the city's drug war.[3]

Ironically, Mayor Marion Barry himself acts as a character in *Slam*. He plays a moralizing judge in a courtroom scene, who condemns the main protagonist for selling marijuana.

Slam is a 1998 independent film, directed by Marc Levin. The two main characters of the film, Joshua and Lauren Bell, are played by the slam poets Saul Williams and Sonja Sohn. The film tells the story of a young African-American man whose talent for poetry is hampered by his social back ground. It won the Grand Jury Prize for a Dramatic Film at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival. The story is set in a Northeast Washington DC ghetto nicknamed 'Dodge City'. The main protagonist, Ray, is sent to DC jail to await trial for a minor drug charge. He considers himself innocent, but he is advised by his public

[2] www.britanica.com/topic/crack-epidemic
[3] www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/local/longterm/tours/scandal/barry.htm

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defender to take a plea. That way, he could get two to three years, instead of up to ten. He is offered two more options, according to which, he could stand trial or cooperate and serve as an informant. Ray does not seem to go with any of these offers, and he is willing to believe that his choices are limited to the choices he is presented with, and he keeps believing that there have to be 'magical doors' that do not lead to self-denial. His life undergoes a major change during the short time he spends imprisoned, where his physical and mental strength are put to test. In prison, Ray attends a writing class for the first time, when the teacher, an attractive black woman called Lauren, announces that the writing workshop program has been canceled and that this is going to be her last meeting with the group. Ray is impressed by Lauren's talent and professional calling, and wants to keep a close friendship with her. After listening to Ray's spontaneous slam performance in the jail yard, one of the hardened cons pays for his bail and Ray is set free before the trial. Ray is eager to find Lauren and spend time with her. Eventually, they become lovers. The final scene is set in front of the Washington Monument, where Ray has run after his successful debut in front of a group of professional slammers arranged by Lauren.

While *Slam* tells the story of an individual's struggle, *Streetwise* depicts the everyday dramas of the Walker family, an African-American family, in the Anacostia neighborhood, Southeast Washington. The film *Streetwise* follows the lives of three brothers as they pursue different methods, trying to make it out of their drug-infested neighborhood that is surrounded by crime, violence, and poverty. It's a hood[4] -action – crime thriller film written and directed by Bruce Brown in his directorial debut, and stars Tim Taylor, Kurt Matthews, Jerry Cummings, D.C. Scorpio, and Sidney Burston. The two elder boys of the family, Eric and Donte, earn their living from selling crack on the corners of Talbert Street in their Anacostia neighborhood. They consider Raymond another crack dealer, a serious danger to their business, and decide to kill him at the local barbershop. Seconds before the raid, Raymond is informed about the assassination plan, and manages to escape. Driven by the desire of taking revenge, Raymond kidnaps Michael, the youngest of the Walker brothers, an innocent boy with big plans for the future, and shoots him in cold blood. Devastated by the news of her son's death, the boys' mother feels that the street has taken away her third child as well, considering her elder sons lost since they started working as crack dealers. The murder enrages Donte and Eric as they seek vengeance against Raymond, which climaxes into a bloody street war between Donte and Raymond. Both Donte and Raymond die that day, only Eric survives. The film has a secondary storyline that follows the life of an unmarried young mother, Tammy, working as a hairdresser, who neglects her young son. Instead, she parties heavily at the clubs, and dates drug hustlers for their money.

[4] Hood film is a film genre originating in the US, which features aspects of urban African-American or Hispanic-American culture, such as hip hop music, street gangs, maras, racial discrimination, broken families, drug use, and trafficking, illegal immigration into the US and the problems of young men coming of age or struggling amid the relative poverty and violent gang activity within such neighborhoods. www.revolvy.com/main/index.php?s=Hood%20film&uid=1575

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Both films offer a realistic insider's view of the African-American experience in Washington D.C. that seldom shows up in films. The life these characters experience in the American capital is a tough one, full of obstacles that seem to be almost impossible to overcome. The easiest way to handle the poverty they face is to make money from different criminal activities, such as drug dealing, gambling, and prostitution. While the center of the capital is thriving, the close neighborhoods witness crime and violence committed by black men. In *Slam*, the jail guardian, confronts Ray with the true situation of black males in prison, and the high rate of black criminality in Washington, D.C.: "You know what that number represents, son? 276,000. Now, listen carefully to me, and you'll understand a little bit about what makes me so angry. We only have less than 500,000 people in the District of Columbia, son. And only 70 percent of them are black. Now, what's 70 percent of 500,000? Do the math! We got about 350,000 black people in D.C.. Of the 350,000, half of them are female, aren't they? Well, what's that? Do the math, son, the math! Less than 175,000 people are males like yourself… We are moving on down the line, son; by the time we cross 300,000, we'll be down to 16 – and 17 – year – olds. We're wiping out our race here in Washington, D.C., and here you are in here playing your silly little games. Well, we got something for you, son! Welcome to the D.C. Jail. You might make it out of here, you might not."[5]

The opening scene of both films offer some important images that foreshadow a totally different D.C. experience. *Streetwise* begins with a series of images of the famous historical monuments, such as the Capitol, the Lincoln Monument, the White House, and the Big Chair. As the images alter, a gunshot sound can be heard after each image, predicting the death of many. The city seems undisturbed as the citizens do their routine walk to work, and the tourists seem to enjoy the view that the city offers. There is a quick turn, and the idyllic sight vanishes in favor of a dirty and poor D.C. neighborhood, with streets full of gangsters and trash. In the following scene, a reporter details he circumstances of a crime in the nation's capital, on Good Hope Road, where a young boy has been shot. The capital shows its other, darker face in the Anacostia neighborhood, where drug-related violence seems to become a daily routine.

Slam opens with an exterior shot of the main protagonist, Ray, who turns his back on the Capitol Building and walks away. This image of turning away from the symbol of the government may represent Ray's distrust in the American government. Although the first and the last images of the film give a frame to the story, in a sense that both represent notorious places in the US capital, the film is open-ended and Ray's story remains unfinished. The last scene is set at the entrance of the Washington Monument, as Ray grabs the bars of the big door and looks up at the great white monument. It's a powerful image opened for the viewers' interpretations. The grids can be seen as the symbol of modern slavery experienced by Ray as being a part of this (black) community that does not offer any way out but the way of crime. He does not feel guilty about selling

[5] Edited by Stratton, Richard and Kim Wozencraft, *Slam* (the screenplay). Grove Press, New York, p 197 https://books.google.ro/books?id=bN5yb3rBf1oC&printsec=frontcover&hl=hu#v=onepage&q&f=false

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drugs in the streets because that is the only way he can earn his living. The monument can be seen as the symbol of an oppressive system that offers him three outrageous options for punishment. Ray feels unable to choose between the options of taking a plea, standing trial, or cooperating with the police. He is struggling with the thought of making any decision that he feels impossible to accept. The film ends and leaves the viewer uncertain about Ray's choice.

In both films, the historical buildings and monuments in the US capital tell unconventional stories about the city and its citizens. A rarely-shown picture of Washington D.C. evolves, which shows the life of the urban black youth. In *Streetwise*, several iconic landmarks are featured throughout the film, which contribute to the overall image of the city. The scene with The Awakening (sculpture, at Hains Point[6]) in the background is one of the most memorable landmarks in the film. The Walker brothers and Loco, their friend and business partner, are at Hains Point, near the Bank of the Potomac River, and they discuss last night's events, when one of their friends was shot while they were playing dice on the street. This is the point in the film when they decide to extent their 'working' territories and involve more drug dealers in order to establish authority in Congress Heights and on Kennedy Street. The statue of the giant embedded in the ground struggling to free himself chosen as a background for this scene, might have a symbolical meaning. Just like the giant in the ground, they are also trapped. They are prisoners of a vicious circle of crime. The more they want to control their lives, the more they sink into their own sins.

Slam contains many suggestive pictures of the Washington Monument taken from unusual angles. One of the most powerful from all, is taken from the window of the jail bus with Ray in the sight. The image with the big white monument behind the window grids Ray stares at, tells us not just about Ray's physical state of being imprisoned, but also about the true situation of black males in the nation's capital.

The films portray a realistic image of the other side of the US capital that shows the realities of black criminality. The city is seen as a place of crime without opportunities of making things right. Escaping the city, and the life the characters are used to, seems almost impossible, although few of them almost succeed. The characters try different means to survive the everyday hardships. The easiest way to overcome poverty is to take part in the thriving business of drug dealing. Ray and the two elder Walker boys started working as drug hustlers at a very young age. The dangerous 'profession' is inherited by the young generation, which contributes to the growth of the culture of black criminality. The eldest Walker boy is the one who initiates Eric and later Michael, into the world of crime. Eric is supported by Loco to leave the city and finish his studies. He takes the advice and leaves the city for a short time, but as soon as he returns, he finds himself immediately involved in the second assassination plan against Raymond, so as to avenge the death of their little brother.

[6] The Awakening was moved from Hains Point in February 2008 to National Harbor

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In both films, art seems to offer an alternative to criminality. Ray from *Slam*, and the youngest Walker boy, both have a passion for poetry and music that seem to become their means of survival. During the short time Ray spent in jail, he realizes that his talent for poetry (slamming) is seen as a means of redemption and can save him from violence. When the hard cons in the D.C. jail plan the 'initiation' of the newcomer, Ray gives expression to his thoughts thorough poetry, which, ultimately, triggers off the admiration of each and every prisoner. After being released from jail, Ray's performance at a slam night, in central Washington D.C. gives him hope for the future, in which he might become a famous artist. While Ray finds poetry as an alternative to crime, Michael chooses music. He is different from the others, he does not even consider following the way of life of his brothers. His big dream is to receive a major record deal. Although Donte tries to persuade him about the benefits of drug dealing, he stays true to his decision. He is aware of the fact that the rivalry between his brothers and the other drug dealer, Raymond, is getting worse, and then he decides to help. Unfortunately, he is captured and ultimately shot by Raymond. The only protagonist who manages to leave her previous life behind is Tammy, the single mother, who is known for working as a prostitute. Her mother encourages her to straighten up her life and provide motherly guidance to her son. Tammy eventually turns away from her old lifestyle, and seeks counseling from the Max Robinson Community Center.

As a conclusion, the two films give a realistic view about the other, dark side of the US capital, where the inhabitants' experience of the city differs from the stereotypical Washington experience that most people are familiar with. The capital is seen as a source of crime and violence, and also a place from where the characters long to escape in order to start a new life. In both films, music and poetry serve as alternatives to violence, allowing the characters to depart from the lifestyle that D.C. ghettoes offer.

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