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"You're going to see a dog slowly go insane . . .," promised *White Dog's* director, Samuel Fuller

an animal film—replete with dog-level tracking shots and frequent close-ups of the dog's eyes. Given the surplus violence of the animal's savage, not always predictable, attacks—their locations ranging from McNichol's living room (TV blasting) to a movie set (a process shot of Venice flickering in the background) to a church (St. Francis of Assisi looking on)—and Fuller's regard for the dog as an alien intelligence, *White Dog* infuses a politically conscious variant of *Jaws* with intimations of Bresson's sublime *Au hasard Balthazar*, not to mention the director's own unclassifiable nuttiness.

Where else but in a Fuller film would a purveyor of trained animals (Burl Ives) hurl darts at a poster of R2D2 ("that's the enemy!") or, having doubled for John Wayne in *True Grit* by reaching

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into a nest of rattlesnakes, proffer his paw with the invitation to shake "the hand that helped Duke win the Oscar!" Of course, the choice contradictions are reserved for Fuller's hero. "To me, this is a laboratory that Darwin himself would go ape over!" Winfield exclaims of the animal farm where he works; "How I wanted to kill that son of a bitch!" he describes his response on discovering the white dog trotting away from his latest victim, "But you can't experiment on a dead dog!" By the time Winfield swears that if he fails to cure this animal, he'll find another and another until he does, he has come to seem like a black Captain Ahab.

Fuller—who strongly criticized American racial attitudes in a number of his '50s action flicks (and made them the subject of *The Crimson Kimono*)—is responsible for some of the toughest social-problem films ever made in the USA. It's understandable that the NAACP would have taken an interest in *White Dog's* production; it's unfortunate that, by warning Paramount that the film

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By J. Hoberman

White Dog

Directed by Samuel Fuller
Written by Fuller and Curtis Hanson, from the novel by Romain Gary
Produced by Jon Davidson
Released by Paramount Pictures
At Film Forum 2
July 12 through 18

Boyz n The Hood

Written and directed by John Singleton
Produced by Steve Nicolaidis
Released by Columbia Pictures
Opening July 12

The most sought-after and elusive of shelved studio releases, Samuel Fuller's *White Dog* has finally been unleashed. Inaugurating Film Forum's month-long Fuller retro, the movie gets its theatrical premiere this Friday, nine years after Paramount decided it was too troublesome to open and sent it to the pound.

Adapted from Romain Gary's 1970 nonfiction novel, a section of which originally appeared in *Life* magazine, *White Dog* is an unusually blunt and suggestively metaphoric account of American racism. In the original story, Gary and his then-wife Jean Seberg find a stray German shepherd who, as they soon discover, has been raised to attack blacks on sight. Although told that the dog is too old to be reconditioned, they ulti-

mately turn him over to a black animal trainer who vengefully reprograms the creature to maul whites (including, at the book's climax, Gary himself). Paramount acquired the property in the mid-1970s; the project then went through seven scripts, with Roman Polanski, Arthur Penn, and Tony Scott variously named to direct, before it fell to Fuller, fresh from his comeback triumph, *The Big Red One* (1980).

In *Sam Fuller on the Set of White Dog*, the Christian Blackwood short that rounds out the Film Forum bill, producer Jon Davidson explains that he recruited Fuller because Fuller was the only man in Hollywood who could rewrite a script and be ready to start shooting in 10 days. It's also possible that Fuller was the only American filmmaker who could successfully short-circuit Gary's "civilized" irony and present *White Dog* head-on, treating the yarn with the sort of absurdist humor and unabashed didacticism the material warranted. Indeed, intuiting his potential audience, Fuller reconceptualized the movie to put the conflict inside the dog's brain: "You're going to see a dog slowly go insane and then come back to sanity in front of you," he promised *Variety*.

Fuller altered Gary's ending (making it more pessimistic and irrational), modified the character of the black trainer (Paul Winfield), and changed the protagon-

ist from an activist movie star into an aspiring actress (childlike Kristy McNichol in her first "adult" role), whom the dog initially saves from a white rapist. In Fuller's world, unlike Gary's, racial paranoia doesn't drop from the sky but is associated from the onset with the paternal protection of the Law.

That, in homage to Seberg and Gary, Fuller maintains the initials J.S. for McNichol's character and R.G. for that of her writer-boy-

same take—as a director, Fuller has lost very little since his masterpieces of the early '60s. (Fuller was exiled from Hollywood at the moment when American public reality was beginning to rival his *Shock Corridor*, and *White Dog* attests to the sad waste of his talent; had his career not fallen apart after *The Naked Kiss*, he might have been making two comparable films a year between 1965 and 1980.)

White Dog's iconic visuals and



Coming of age, maybe: Tre (Cuba Gooding Jr.) and Doughboy (Ice Cube) in *Boyz*

friend, is suggestive of his film's boldly abstract tabloid stylistics. Filmed in headlines, framed as allegory, *White Dog* combines hard-boiled sentimentality and hysterical violence, sometimes in the

cartoon dialogue ("Your dog is a four-legged time bomb!") are given unexpected dignity by the somber piano doodling and tense, moody strings of Ennio Morricone's brilliant score. Still, this is

might give racists ideas and encourage the production of actual white dogs, the NAACP provided the studio—and later NBC—with an excuse to suppress what seems

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to me one of the most unflinching statements to ever come out of Hollywood—something like *Rin Tin Tin Joins the Ku Klux Klan*.

White Dog “naturalizes” racism in a strikingly unnatural way. While the movie’s white characters are invariably amazed by the whole idea of the “white dog,” most of the black characters treat his existence as a brute fact of life. Unlike in Gary’s novel, the dog here doesn’t seem to have a name—he’s referred to once as “Mr. Hyde,” leaving us to consider just who his “Dr. Jekyll” might be. Late in the day, we discover his creator is a kindly old codger, with two little granddaughters and box of candy for the lady who sheltered his pet.

What’s stunning about *White Dog* is how it gives race hatred both a human and subhuman

face. Which is the mask? Conditioned as it is to fear Willie Horton, white America might well ponder the bloody image of that snarling canine.