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Flipper Purify and Furious Styles

Style and purification are the two strategies apparent in recent African-American cinema, argues Armond White, as he looks at the new wave of films from 'Jungle Fever' to 'Boyz N the Hood'

Spike Lee and 'Jungle Fever': stimulating the senses for a political agenda
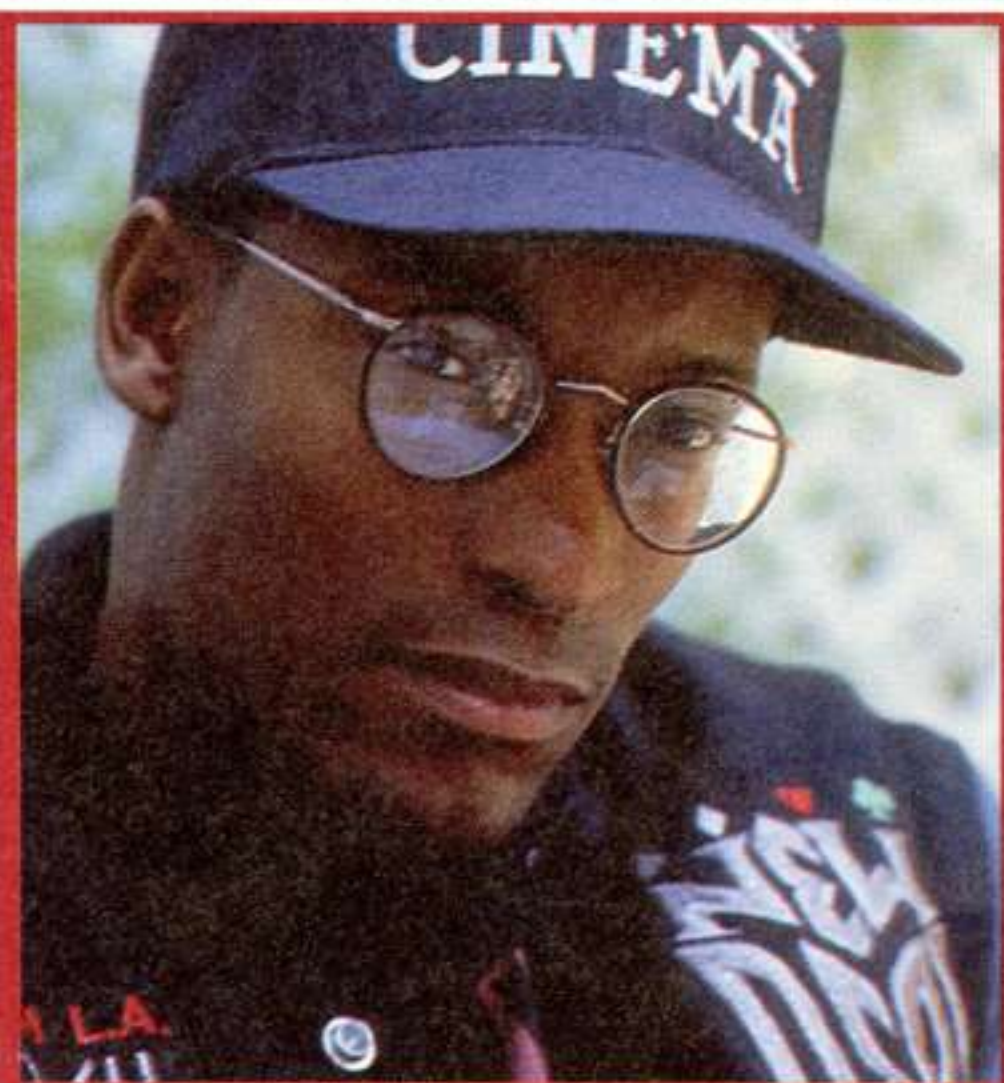
John Singleton and 'Boyz N the Hood': translating hiphop culture to the screen

● So far American movie critics don't have a name for the new films (mostly debuts) by African-American directors that have sprouted in their midst. There is the catch-all term 'black film', which manages to be confusing, anachronistic and insulting all at once. 'Black' could easily be a reference to a visual style or sensibility, like *film noir*. As an ethnic designation, 'black' is politically less appropriate than the preferred 'African-American'; it separates − or stigmatises − work by or about people of colour. Except for fine, rigorous efforts by such scholars as Richard Dyer, no one has attempted to define 'white' in cinema, which makes the term 'black film' an obvious, if unconscious, reflex of the racist thinking that US film culture repeats from the larger society. The term does nothing but reinforce the rigid critical atmosphere that so many decades of white-only Hollywood production and film theory have created.

It may be more helpful in characterising these movies to draw on terms used in the films themselves. After all, they include some compelling names: Flipper Purify, Spike Lee's protagonist in *Jungle Fever*, or Furious Styles, a major character in John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood*. Taken by themselves, these names are not clues to the characters' African-American identities, though they do tell a lot about the sensibilities of the artists who thought them up. Mainstream movie-making opportunities have opened up to young black film artists at a moment when the most vital popular art in the US is hiphop music and its attendant fashion and video culture. These movies extend hiphop's manipulation of artistic strategies, which celebrate cultural purity and are involved in the creation of a politically aware, ethnocentric generation that is interested in furiously styled dress and behaviour.

It may even be possible to divide the new films into two camps − either Flipper Purify or Furious Styles. The Furious Styles side would include Singleton; Joseph Vasquez (*Hangin' with the Homeboys*); Bill Duke (*A Rage in Harlem*); and Mario Van Peebles (*New Jack City*). The Flipper Purify side would have Lee; Robert Townsend (*The Five Heartbeats*); Matty Rich (*Straight Out of Brooklyn*); Topper Crew (*Talkin' Dirty After Dark*). Character names like Furious Styles and Flipper Purify are self-conscious ploys that make it possible to appreciate the entire new wave of films by African-American directors as a distinct cultural development. They are a way of letting the film art define itself from the inside, just like 'blues', 'jazz', 'bebop', 'soul' and 'hiphop'.

Whatever the value of these insider labels, they have to be an improvement on the current level of critical analysis. In the US, critics have mostly understood the filmic expressions of black directors as something different from − and lesser than − the cultural practice of white directors. The subject matter is defined as social 'problems' (*Jungle Fever*'s details about interracial sex); the films are categorised as social 'protest' (*Straight Out of Brooklyn*'s exposé of urban poverty). These were the same terms

that novelist James Baldwin railed against in the early 60s as the critical establishment's condescending way of limiting the artistic resonance of what was then called 'Negro literature'. The reason the film industry has ignored or wasted film-makers such as Spencer Williams, Norman O. Bland, Bill Gunn and Wendell B. Harris is that their art didn't fit the view that African-Americans are a permanent underclass without any self-sustaining culture or heritage.

From the inept way reviewers failed to note the Brechtian aspects of Lee's work or to chart the narrative shift − from documentary *mise-en-scène* to Eisensteinian montage − in Rich's *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, it's clear these films are not thought of as art. Critics have missed their furious styles and moralising tropes. Popular press reviewers rarely notice form anyway; they look past it, through it, to subject and story. In the cases of films by blacks, critics hunt for the sociological residue. But it is as a distinct cultural development that *Jungle Fever*, *Straight Out of Brooklyn*, *Boyz N the Hood* and *Chameleon Street* are most fascinating.

Jungle Fever

Jungle Fever tells the story of a romance between a middle-class black architect (Wesley Snipes) and his working-class white secretary (Annabella Sciorra). In addition, Lee mixes in a treatise on black women's feelings of entitlement (featuring Lonette McKee), contributes a subplot of old-fashioned gospel zealotry (featuring Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis) and weaves through the whole a cautionary tale on the horrors of crack and drug abuse (highlighted by Samuel L. Jackson's performance).

The impulse behind the film was the racially-based killing of a black teenager in an Italian-American neighbourhood of New York in 1989 (the film opens with a dedication to the slain youth, Yusuf Hawkins). Lee's method in making the film is to preserve the moral outrage this historical event inspired through a compilation of anecdotes on the related themes of race hatred and race mixing. For Lee, political consciousness is not just an imperative; it has a definite agenda. *Jungle Fever* plays this agenda out through the moral of its romance: that black and white lovers must, in the end, stick to their own kind.

Lee's previous film, *Do the Right Thing*, was just as self-conscious and full of artifice as *Jungle Fever*, but its messages were genuinely ambiguous, encompassing a wider range of human responses. It was profound, rather than dogmatic like *Jungle Fever*, in which Lee traffics in aesthetic complications while promoting what seems to be a private sense of racial integrity. Lee surpasses his peers − both black and white − in his use of the camera, his multiple storylines and the music tracks that counterpoint the dialogue. Probably no director since Robert Altman has sought to stimulate moviegoers' senses so aggressively, but Lee does it with a specific political purpose. In opposing a national cinema whose tradition says style must serve story, Lee spearheads a move- ▶

Black teens see life in terms of survival; white teens see it in terms of fun
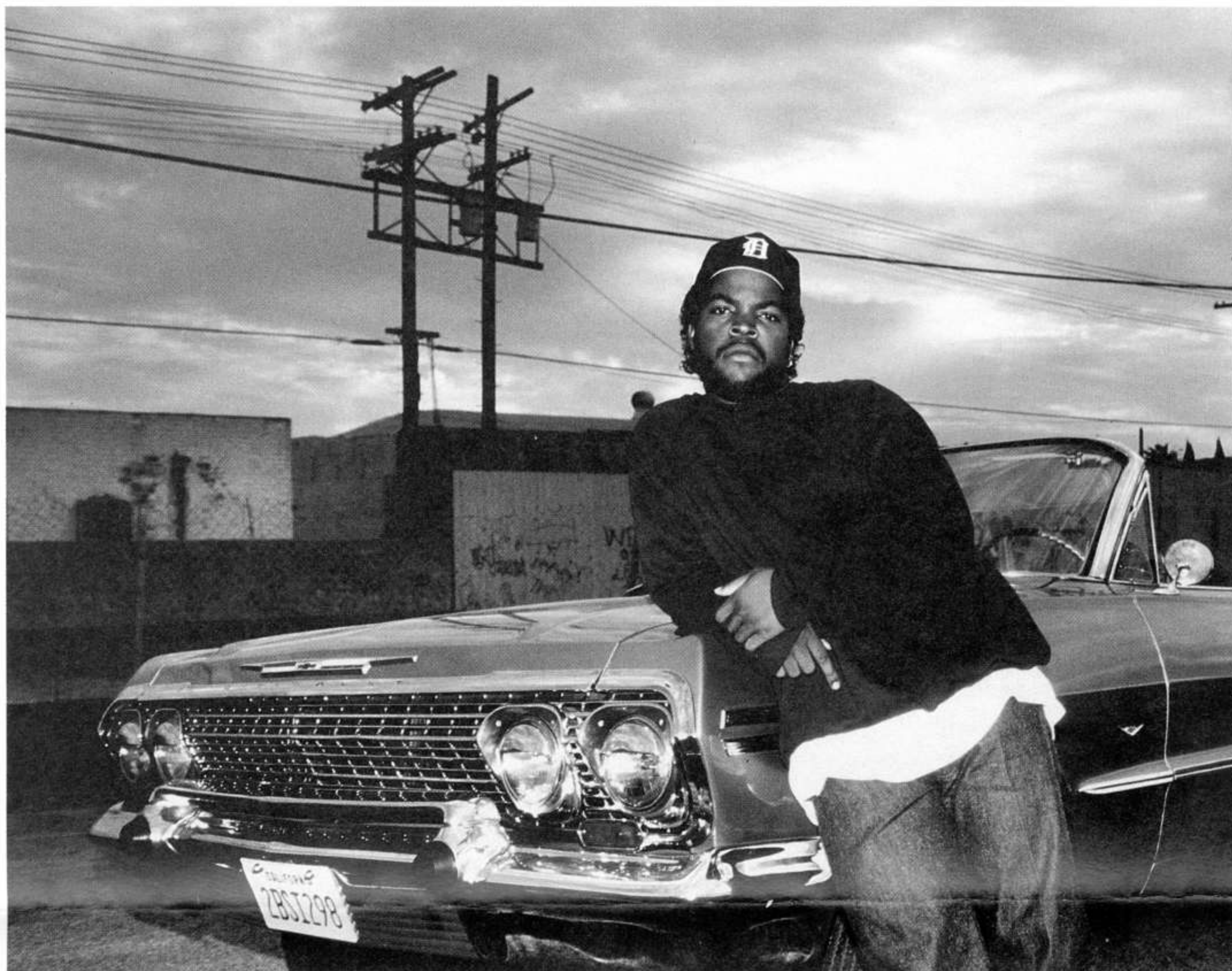
'Boyz N the Hood': Brandi (Nia Long) comforts anguished 'nice boy' Tre, left. Above: the surly Dough Boy, played by rap musician Ice Cube

◀ ment where narrative must be shaped into agit-prop or melodrama to meet the imperatives of Afrocentricity. He's catering to the social and spiritual needs of African-Americans.

Boyz N the Hood

Furious Styles is the name of the role model/ father figure in John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood*. The name tells you what drives Singleton's art: a sense of commitment and an interest in technical display. He turns the typical coming-of-age drama into an expression of the contemporary social pressures affecting young black American males, while also showing what sparks their imaginative lives. To realise how unusual this is for modern Hollywood, one need only contrast *Boyz N the Hood* with the 80s Brat Pack films: in the former, black teens see life in terms of survival; in the latter, white teens see it in terms of fun.

Singleton is the most successful of the new directors at translating the swing and heat of hiphop culture into cinematic language. Set in

the culture of gang war and hard core rap of strife-ridden South Central Los Angeles, *Boyz N the Hood* follows four males from their pre-teen years to post-adolescence. One of the stars is Ice Cube (a former member of the rap group, Niggers With Attitude), whose manner, both folksy and surly, is a key to the film's matter of fact view of suffering. Singleton turns the sexual confession of lead character Tre (Cuba Gooding Jr), a 'nice boy', into a leering, hyped-up fantasy; the scene of older boys intimidating younger boys becomes a primal male myth, both intense and pathetic.

Not much in *Boyz N the Hood* seems freshly observed or imaginatively conceived; its different scenes evoke Hollywood conventions of filming night-time street fights and daytime domestic fights. Nor is it a one-of-a-kind cultural satire like the 1987 Run-DMC film *Tougher than Leather* (directed by record producer Rick Rubin). Here, macho fantasy was parodied by pushing the tawdry extremes of 70s Blaxploitation films such as *Shaft*, *Three the Hard Way* and

Dolemite to the point of revealing the absurdity in the conditions of ghetto living. Without *Tougher than Leather*'s astute consideration of the relationship of pop art and real experience, Furious Styles films like Singleton's and Mario Van Peebles' are in danger of turning black American life into a set of Hollywood clichés.

Straight Out of Brooklyn

Matty Rich's *Straight Out of Brooklyn* makes myth out of *Evening News* pathologies. Set in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn inside the housing projects' miasma of drugs, crime and violence, the story centres on young Dennis (Lawrence Gilliard Jr), sick of his impoverishment and tired of watching his weary father (George T. Odom) beating his mother (Ann D. Sanders). To lift himself out of this misery, he plans with two homeboys, Kevin (Mark Malone) and Larry (played by Rich himself), to rob a local drug dealer and use the money to escape.

Rich exemplifies the hiphop era through an uncanny blend of polemics and art. In his

'Jungle Fever': Spike Lee's overtly nationalist message that whites and blacks should stick to their own kind is played out through the eventual failure of the love affair between ambitious black architect Flipper Purify (Wesley Snipes), below, and his white Italian-American secretary (Annabella Sciorra), left

vision, African-American living is purified to the essentials of poverty and death statistics. Rich's 'slappy' sound recording, out-of-focus compositions, cluttered blocking that has the actors' backs to the camera, and a restaurant scene in which the sounds of eating garble the dialogue, are intentionally presented as if rough-hewn, natural. But in *Straight Out of Brooklyn* Rich's vision is not raw observation; it's decidedly cooked. It's a meal prepared with condescension.

Straight Out of Brooklyn will appeal to those people who objected to *The Color Purple* because the lifestyle shown seemed too clean, too rich for Southern blacks. Rich's movie brandishes poverty as the only black truth, his idea of ghetto interior decor more like a junkie flophouse than the earnestly pieced-together living space of a struggling family. White critics should not fool themselves that this film's lack of beauty reveals a sociological essence.

Rich isn't skilled enough yet to convey more fully the pleasures and terrors of experience. A typical scene, in which the lower-class hero and his girlfriend ponder life against the skyline of the big city, turns into a grim (and inevitable) statement of the director's credo. Dennis complains to Shirley (Reana E. Drummond). "They [built New York] by steppin' on the black man, steppin' on the black family!" The trouble with this heartfelt expression of feeling is that it's merely sincere.

It isn't until the end of the movie that the twenty-year-old film-maker gives any sign that he knows what he's doing. This climactic sequence shows the simultaneous deaths – in a hospital and on the streets – of the lead character's parents. These events are edited together with a quick, calibrated rhythm that suggests the remorselessness of fate. However, the control is all Rich's. The final manipulation of his characters' lives is the one place in this film that Rich doesn't try to get away with 'realism', and the moment works for precisely that reason. It's an unexpectedly efficient and poignant close to a film that has steadily ground down

one's senses through the shambling, artfully artless style Rich uses.

The ending of *Straight Out of Brooklyn* comes as a relief as much as a surprise; one responds to the skill and creativity that are finally revealed. In the rest of the film, Rich threatens to claim virtue for its 'primitive' look and amateurish methods – an approach that conforms dangerously to the mainstream (white) notion that black artists are incapable of any sophisticated expression. *Straight Out of Brooklyn*'s ending proves that Rich's ideas got on screen through deliberateness and guile.

But the savvy ending also reveals these are disingenuous tropes. Rich eventually summons skill and discipline only to underscore the nihilism of his fiction. The ending of *Straight Out of Brooklyn* effects patricide and matricide. It's the result of a naive young man's sentimental misunderstanding of the human crises he pretends to address. Dennis could be seen as an innocent, violently cut off from roots, heritage and love, but even that angle frees him of ▶

Rich is preaching down to black America for white America's benefit
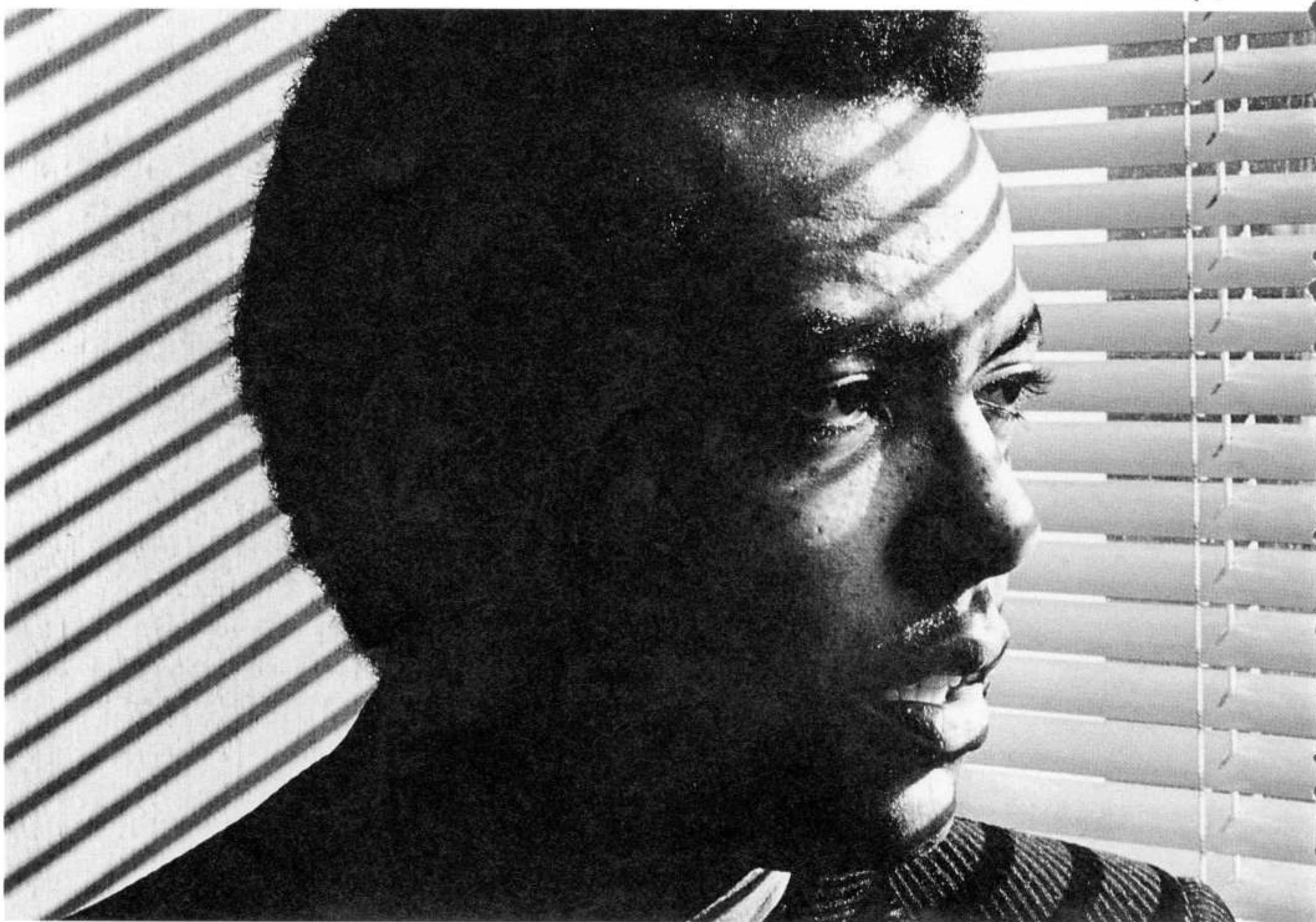
'Straight Out of Brooklyn': Kevin (Mark Malone), Dennis (Lawrence Gilliard Jr) and Larry, played by director Matty Rich, plot their escape from a life reduced on the screen to misery, impoverishment and death, left

◄ responsibility and leaves the audience in a void. Dennis is hapless; Matty Rich is not: he's denying the truth he knows about adolescent resourcefulness. He's preaching down to black America for white America's benefit. In the world of entertainment, that's the real sign of a Dead End Kid.

Chameleon Street

Wendell B. Harris' *Chameleon Street* stands apart as an idiosyncratic, artful African-American filmic expression. There's an intellectual fury in Harris' art that separates it from the issue-oriented, ideological platform approach of pop film-makers and links him more to the mavericks who go their own way and demand more of their audiences. *Chameleon Street* opened in New York at the same time as the fiftieth anniversary of *Citizen Kane*. And just as Orson Welles' first movie raised the stakes of the American sound film, Harris' debut marks a revolutionary shift in the development of 90s movies about African-Americans.

Chameleon Street is based on the real-life experience of William Douglas Street, a Michigan man whose different guises in the early 80s – as surgeon, journalist, lawyer and student – kept him in flux between prison and a frustrating marriage. Harris, who plays the lead role in a film he also wrote and directed, explores the psychological stress of Street's character with a shocking and disturbing sense of humour. Harris' performance brings an extraordinary African-American smoothness to the screen. He makes Street's ability to talk himself into and out of any situation a paradigm for the methods by which black people can push themselves through white-dominated society.

This is the most morally daring, stylistically insolent film by *any* US film-maker in recent memory. Echoing the style of *Citizen Kane*, *Chameleon Street* has its characters directly address the audience, each speaking bits of sentences that add up to an anecdote describing the protagonist. Though the story is also indebted to Welles' *Mr Arkadin*, Harris does not passively imitate his sources. He has convincingly absorbed Welles' Byzantine psychological mode of address as well as his sophisticated manipulation of images. In one of the most startling scenes in American movie history, Street acts out the pressure he feels from the outside world in a harrowing game with his daughter. The balance of sanity and insanity is explored in a way that only a master film-maker would dare.

As Street's compulsion to fit into society rapidly moves into an overwhelming neurosis, it becomes obvious that his condition is a result of racism. This rascally changeling is the kind of adaptable and damaged black that many US cross-over success stories politely cover up. The character of Street gives the audience a rare view of racial psychosis; it's like staring into an abyss. Harris illustrates traumatised experience with a long close-up of a steaming cup of coffee which refers to the cosmos/coffee cup scene in Jean-Luc Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*: part of a series of Euro-

'Chameleon Street': director Wendell B. Harris, left, plays a smooth-talking changeling who goes crazy trying to fit the demands of white-dominated society
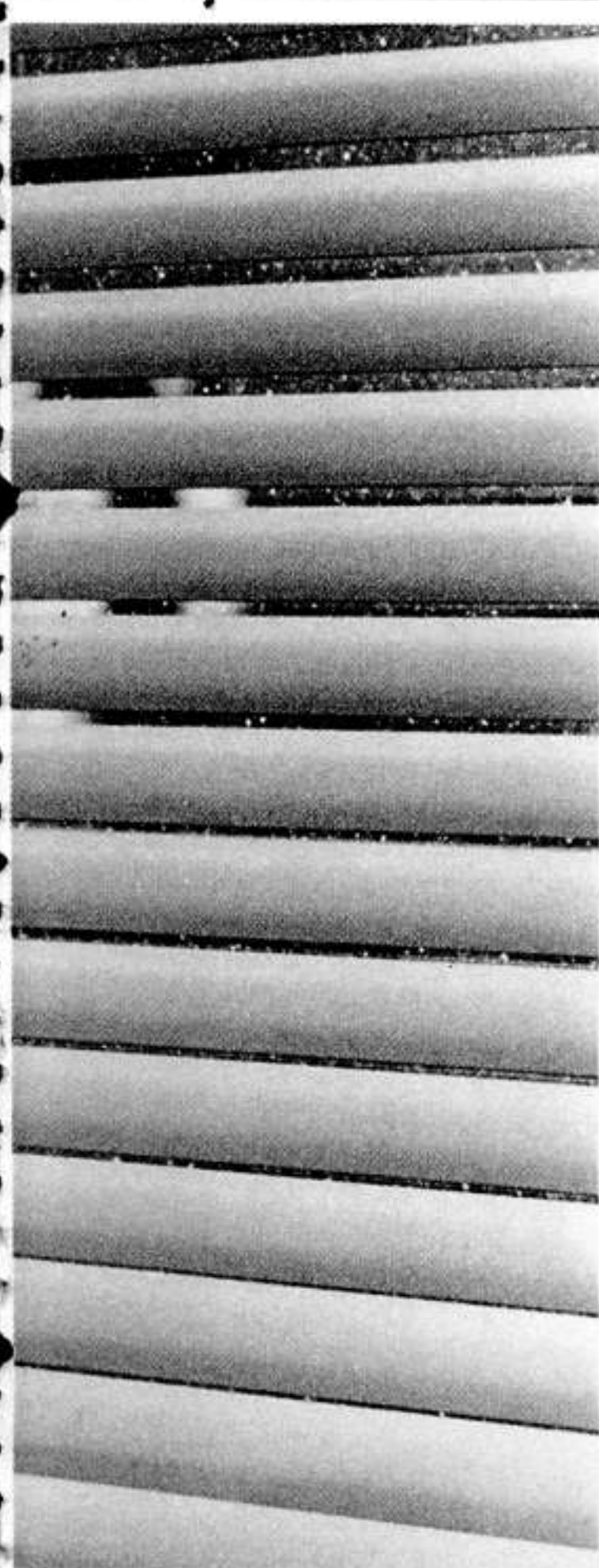
John Singleton, director of 'Boyz N the Hood', talks with Peter Brunette

Singleton's street noises

● Present at this year's Cannes festival for the world premiere of his first film, *Boyz N the Hood*, a sophisticated if somewhat preachy account of three young boys' violent coming of age in the black ghetto of South Central Los Angeles, twenty-three-year-old John Singleton is clearly enjoying the attention.

When I arrive for our scheduled interview, he is on his way back to his room. He suggests that we talk as we walk along the Croisette, Cannes' jam-packed main thoroughfare. We try this for about ninety seconds, and it's clearly not going to work. I propose instead that we reschedule with the publicist and he is instantly, genuinely grateful. Despite what the folks back home think, Cannes is hard on everyone.

Boyz N the Hood is a tough, raw film. The sense of frustration and urgency expressed is so great that at times Singleton's characters seem to mount invisible soapboxes to address the audience directly and shake some sense into them. Judged from a strictly aesthetic viewpoint, these moments are flaws; in this film, paradoxically, they add to the overwhelming feeling of real life and direct witness. Singleton quietly observes that "films serve different purposes, some are meant just to entertain, but there's also room for other films that inform as well".

Unsurprisingly, the film is being heavily promoted as 'authentic', which for Singleton means "that people are seeing some stuff they've never seen before". But what matters to him, in the end, is that *Boyz N the Hood* is authentic "to the brothers and sisters I made the film for. The people on the street. I got the supreme compliments from brothers in Inglewood and Compton and South Central" (black ghettos in Los Angeles). Singleton says that *Boyz* allows them to "see themselves on film and they can reflect upon it. Think about their situation and the situation of their friends and their family".

Does he think that because of the unflattering way black characters within the film are portrayed, he will be criticised for producing negative images or for blaming the victim? "Maybe I'll be criticised by older black

people, but the younger black people will know what I'm talking about. The older generation won't like the language in my film, anyway, but actually I'm just saying the same thing that the hard-core rappers are saying. They say it on wax, and I'm saying it on film".

After the press screening, some North American male critics objected to the treatment of women – perhaps with more than a little of a 'more-feminist-than-thou' tone. Singleton's response is that "the men in the film treat women differently according to what their backgrounds are. Tre [the chief protagonist, played by Cuba Gooding Jr] doesn't treat women the same way that Dough Boy [a violence-prone teenager played by rap musician Ice Cube] does, you see. I was trying to show real life, in the streets. The women don't just stand there and take it. They talk shit back.

"I was trying to show that there's a certain schism between black men and black women right now", he continues. "Things have been made easier for black women but not for black men, so what I'm trying to say is that we need to stick together instead of fighting each other".

The young men in the film regularly call each other "bitch" and "cunt", as though women were the lowest form of life. Singleton, however, says that "that's too much of an analytical observation. It's just an attack on one's manhood, like if you would call someone a faggot, they'd say bitch. They have their manhood attacked so often they attack each other's manhood in various ways, verbally and physically".

The film's greatest weakness is, in fact, Singleton's uncritical worship of manhood and maleness, which at times approaches an obsessive level. But first films, like first novels, perhaps need to be autobiographically obsessive on some level in order to get made. Singleton says he closely modelled Tre's father, Furious Styles (played by Larry Fishburne of *The Color Purple* and *School Daze*), the film's strongest character, on his own father, whom he describes as "awesome".

I mention the recent controversial news story about a black educator in Los Angeles

who, because he felt that the necessary discipline could not be instilled in a co-educational setting, decided to set up an 'academy' that would only admit boys. "I think he's right. I had a couple of black male teachers, in addition to my father and my mother, who set me straight on the right path. It's like a woman can't teach a young boy how to be a man, only a man can teach a young boy that. That's what was most on my mind in the film. That's the whole thing".

One of the points the film effectively makes is that violence of all varieties is the everyday reality for these young men simply trying to survive long enough to grow up. Besides the gang violence and the verbal violence, there is a constant psychological violence expressed most effectively in the subconsciously annoying whumpa-whumpa of unseen police helicopters that runs throughout the film. "Yeah, you get it, you're smart, man, you're smart", Singleton responds. "But there are a lot of stupid people in the world, and they're not going to get that. They'll say, why is it so noisy. They won't know that that's there to add to the atmosphere, and that's just how the atmosphere is".

Singleton himself is both smart and a survivor. On the basis of having received several prestigious writing awards while in film school, he signed with Creative Artists Agency while still a student. A young executive at Columbia got hold of his screenplay, passed it along to studio head Frank Price, and a meeting was set up for the next weekend. "I just pitched myself to direct my own film. I figured that if you could tell your story to anybody on the street, orally, you could tell any studio executive".

When I ask if he has any recommendations for other young black film-makers trying to break into the industry, Singleton emphasises that it was his writing ability that got the studio interested. "I never did a film at USC. All they teach you in school is theory. This film was my chance to put it into practice. And know your history, know where you're from. It gives you a firm foundation and you don't feel you're on shaky ground with anybody or anything."

pean art film references – from Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* to *The Shanghai Gesture* – that Harris uses as a clue to Street's identity crisis.

Apparently *Chameleon Street* represents a vision that is too uncompromising, too distinctive (what hiphoppers call "Too Black, Too Strong") for the existing networks of mainstream film culture. Since winning the Grand Prize at the 1990 Sundance-US Film Festival, it has been a hot potato tossed around the American film scene: the New York Film Festival and the Museum of Modern Art's New Directors series both seemed afraid to touch it and even distributors have been wary. Critics who praised the psycho-social satire of Woody Allen's *Zelig* have ignored Harris' darker treatment of the same issues of identity. What these films demand is that American cinema grows up and accepts the complexity of the African-American experience in ways other than in the form of gangster films and showbiz musicals.
● *Jungle Fever* opens in the UK on 6 September and *Boyz N the Hood* on 25 October