

Heroes of the 20th century race relations in the 1970s critical thinking examples...

[Health & Medicine](#), [Drugs](#)



In the 1970s and 1980s, even up to the early 1990s, African American film was experiencing a renaissance. In this time, following the Civil Rights Movement, African-American youth needed new heroes to follow, navigating this post-segregation period of lingering prejudice and the pressure for black Americans to "make good" on their chance to make something of themselves. The pressures of the inner city and gang and drug influences profoundly impacted the black community, and raised racial tensions even further between blacks and whites. However, throughout the years, these pressures were explored in black films of that era, presenting heroes for young black men to either emulate or learn from. From Youngblood Priest in *Super Fly* to Flipper Purify in *Jungle Fever*, young black men learned to both defend themselves in a world that did not care for them, and learn to find their way around the shaky issue of interracial relationships.

Super Fly

In one of the most famous blaxploitation films of all time, the 1972 film *Super Fly*, young black men find a hero they can emulate (if one they potentially shouldn't) - Youngblood Priest, cocaine dealer and overall action hero. While he is an unrepentant drug dealer at the beginning of the film, the events revolve around his attempts to get out of the drug business and make enough money to provide for himself. Priest is both an example of a strong black character and a cautionary tale for young blacks to not get into the drug business - he attempts to get out of the business despite everyone else telling him not to. This interaction provides ample subtext for Priest as representative of the black youth of the era, being told he has no higher aspiration than the drug and gang lifestyle. With *Super Fly*, the heroic part of

Youngblood Priest comes not from his stylized violence and victory over his foes, but the need to escape the very real problems of drug abuse and crime.

Do the Right Thing

Spike Lee's incendiary, stylish film *Do the Right Thing* is a wonderful example of race relations in the late 1980s; in the face of police brutality and gang warfare in the ghettos of America, a fine line exists between black pride and equality, portrayed elegantly and energetically by director Spike Lee. Multiculturalism is at a razor's edge in this film, with many members of the community being one arbitrary offense away from being beaten or killed by an insensitive police force, or prejudiced, conflicted whites in their own neighborhood. The events of the film are representative of the theory of interest convergence - much of the resistance from whites in the film revolve around the maintenance of their business by shunning the 'undesirables.' Everyday racism also comes into play throughout the film, given the attitudes of whites toward blacks presented in the film.

The defining moment of the film - Mookie (Spike Lee) throwing a garbage can into Sal's window, sparking a race riot - is one of the most powerful images in black cinema, as it showcases a defiant image of rage at the death of a man due to racism (Radio Raheem). There are many who have differing opinions as to whether or not Mookie "does the right thing" by doing this; in one way, Mookie may have saved Sal's life by throwing the trash can, as it distracts the mob from him onto his property. On the other hand, he may have simply wanted to incite violence as an outburst of his own. This is an

example of an attempt to reverse or correct the everyday racism that is evident in Sal's behavior and attitudes toward blacks. Either way, this moment and many others help to make Mookie quite the hero in this film, a champion for those who have suffered police brutality because of their race and just wanted to make a statement against it.

Jungle Fever

In the 1991 Spike Lee film *Jungle Fever*, Flipper Purify (Wesley Snipes) starts an affair with an Italian-American named Angie Tucci (Annabella Sciorra), and both encounter significant resistance from both sides of their family. The film deals with the complications of two people of different races starting a relationship, *Jungle Fever* presenting the opposition of the relationship by both black and white members of the community, indicating the cultural resistance both races feel at the prospect of "mixing."

In *Jungle Fever*, the issue of the interracial relationship is compounded by the fact that both Flipper and Angie are cheating on someone - Flipper with his wife, Angie with her boyfriend. Instead of offering a positive role model for young black men in interracial relationships, *Flipper* is a cautionary tale in *Jungle Fever*. Throughout the film, we see the consequences of the kind of pressure both races place on them for dating outside their race. A waitress, played by Queen Latifah, chastises Flipper for dating a white woman. Angie's father Mike beats her mercilessly for dating Flipper after he finds out, throwing her out of the house. The issue is always swiftly dealt with, and Flipper and Angie are not given a chance to prove to others that they love each other. They cannot even maintain the relationship for themselves;

eventually, the racial differences and the pressure placed upon both of them forces them to break up.

This film provides a concrete and subtle example of how black men should and should not operate in a post-racial world, especially interacting with the opposite sex and relationships. Flipper, in his attempts to find a way to bridge the gap between races by dating a white woman, finds too much resistance from both sides and eventually has to give up in the end. The film means to show him as a hero in the sense that he is a cautionary tale; you are not meant to become Flipper.

In conclusion, these three important films in the black cinema culture provide many different flawed heroes for young African-Americans to emulate, from the repentant drug dealer Youngblood Priest to the disenfranchised ghetto occupant Mookie, to the philandering and flawed Flipper Purify. All of these figures teach African Americans in a post-segregation society how to deal with the underground drug culture, the police, conditions in the ghetto and pressures of interracial sexual relationships. To that end, these films present heroes that offer warnings and teachings to their audience when they needed them most.

Works Cited

Lee, Spike (dir). Do the right thing: a Spike Lee joint. Perf. Danny Aiello, Spike Lee, John

Turturro. 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks, 1989. Film.

Lee, Spike (dir). Jungle Fever. Perf. Wesley Snipes, Annabella Sciorra, John

Turturro. Universal

Pictures, 1991. Film.

Parks Jr., Gordon (dir). Super Fly. Perf. Ron O'Neal, Sheila Frazier, Julius

Harris. Warner Bros.,

1972. Film.