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EDDIE MURPHY IN THE CUT: RACE, CLASS, CULTURE, AND 1980S FILM COMEDY

by

GAIL A. MCFARLAND

Under the Direction of Lia T. Bascomb, PhD

ABSTRACT

Race, class, and politics in film comedy have been debated in the field of African American culture and aesthetics, with scholars and filmmakers arguing the merits of narrative space without adequately addressing the issue of subversive agency of aesthetic expression by black film comedians. With special attention to the 1980-1989 work of comedian Eddie Murphy, this study will look at the film and television work found in this moment as an incisive cut in traditional Hollywood industry and narrative practices in order to show black comedic agency through aesthetic and cinematic narrative subversion. Through close examination of the film, *Beverly Hills Cop* (Brest, 1984), this project works to shed new light on the cinematic and standup trickster influences of comedy, and the little recognized existence of the 1980s as a decade that defines a base period for chronicling and inspecting the black aesthetic narrative subversion of American film comedy.

INDEX WORDS: Comedy, Eddie Murphy, Film, Liminal space, Parody, Pastiche, Subversion, Trickster

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GAIL A. MCFARLAND

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Art

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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2019

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to every teacher I have ever had – beginning with my mother who taught me to love the written word, and to honor the courage it takes to write a book. This work is also dedicated to my father, an American Airman who believed in his country *almost* as much as he believed in me. And to my praying grandmother, Alberta Breedlove, who taught me that love really does give you wings, and that God expects you to soar with them. And finally, this work is dedicated to The Academy, in the hope that it helps.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Eddie Murphy is a comedy god... [He] did more than Richard Pryor from a financial standpoint as it relates to standup comedy and movies [Murphy] produced and then wrote and then cast other niggas and brought them all together. One man did all that.

-- Kat Williams (Littleton, 2008: 157).

Looking at American film comedy, it is easily understood why comedian Kat Williams considers comedian, actor, and recording artist, Eddie Murphy to be a “comedy god” (Littleton, 2008: 157). As a comedic trendsetter, and possessor of film and narrative agency, Murphy, especially during the 1980s, wielded the authority of independent film and standup comedy with the force of referent power¹ (French & Raven, 1959: 150-167). This referent power and its resulting celebrity allowed Murphy to become an iconic culture producer at a time when there were no other actors like him in either television or film comedy. This cultural production and subversive address of race, class, and culture, under the influences of *Saturday Night Live (SNL)*, the affordable Video Cassette Recorder (VCR), and the socioeconomic conditions of the 1980s, defined a post-Blaxploitation era of film and black performance that this study considers to be the Eddie Murphy Moment.

To say that there was no one like him, one has to note that Murphy, as a self-styled, urban-focused, young black male standup comedian, was physically and aesthetically different from the actors engaged in the formulaic traditions surrounding the mold of what have become

¹ French and Raven consider referent power to be the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events through strong interpersonal relationship skills. This study also considers those skills to include the invention of a “cult of personality” as influentially attached to interpersonal relationship skills. As an aspect of personal power created through the values of the individual, referent power is also defined as the power of respect for talent and agency and focuses on collaboration and influence rather than command and control.

classic 1980s Hollywood films. A gifted mimic and parodist, whose television career pulled and prodded all things associated with the culture and history of the United States, Murphy accepted and frequently flaunted his African American complexity through his comic embrace and disturbance of race, class, and culture. Standing outside of hegemonic Western comedic and film gazes and traditions by virtue of race and the acculturation of celebrity, Murphy was positioned to transform comedy through radical deconstructions of narrative, and performance. In understanding radical change as change that occurs relatively quickly and modifies the nature of social structures and organizational practices, it is his effect as an agent of radical change in 1980s film that carries the weight of the Eddie Murphy Moment.

The significance of Murphy's impact is one of intentional action versus aggressive kismet or fortunate accident. His career, especially within the context of the Eddie Murphy Moment, readily demonstrates canny intellect, leadership, racial and artistic inspiration, and immense talent, though the level of his art is often called into question because of the populist orientation of his film, television, vocal, and stage work. Consideration of the Murphy Moment suggests that his comedy has been contingent upon a work ethic that magnifies innate talent and studied skill to move the Murphy Moment forward in its impact on the Hollywood comedic film model through his ability to bridge race, class, culture, and technology in 1980s television and film, allowing him to influence the discourse of film comedy.

To further define the Eddie Murphy Moment, one almost literally has to begin "Live from New York." The famous phrase typically opens the sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live*, by signaling the end of the show's cold opening sketch and leading into its classic title sequence and cast introductions. Those introductions brought Eddie Murphy to television for four years (1980-1984), establishing a nationally branded comedic product and stylized concept

of presentation in the process. The ludic Murphy approach to standup, television, and film comedy combined a gendered post-modern sense of race, class, and culture to form a pastiche, very much like that seen in the comedy of Richard Pryor (Hagins, 2007). Like Pryor, Murphy's milieu is highly urban, driven by the stylistic verbiage and tones of 1970s Blaxploitation films, and often defined by attitudes of skepticism and irony. Also, like Pryor, the genesis of Murphy's skill set was the small and intimate stage of the black comedy club. However, unlike Pryor, before moving from the comedy stage to film, Murphy found a wider platform for his standup comedy and improvisational skills.

Village Voice cultural critic Greg Tate looks at the comedic and improvisational skills that served as Murphy's keys to the kingdom of racialized American comedy, noting that it is these skills that allow Murphy to access his liminal "Stagolee (read: 'Bad Nigguh') dimension, the degree to which [he] seem[s] to be in manly control of [his] respective image," and to merge it with his "Proper Negro profile" (Tate, 1992: 50). The "Proper Negro profile" finds definition in the politics of respectability,² Murphy's easy assumption of the trickster persona,³ and the layered self-aware apposition of Murphy's comedic critique of race and 1980s U.S. society. The "Stagolee dimension" and the fluid image control of the "Proper Negro" are essential to the creation of Murphy's obviously race-infused characters, such as "Mr. White," on *SNL*.

² The politics of respectability may be defined as attempts by marginalized groups to police their own members, in terms of protective appearance and behavior, through the practice of showing their social values as being compatible and aligned with mainstream values rather than challenging hegemonic failure to accept value differences.

³ Understood through many cultures as a cunning or deceptive character, often of supernatural origin, the trickster appears in various forms in the folklore of many traditions. For this study, the trickster is considered to be an interstitial person or technology "associated with challenging the social order by introducing destabilisation and imbalance... and as an integral element of contemporary media culture" (Bassil-Mozorow, 2012: 6).

Through the persona of “Mr. White,” an inversion of minstrel comedy, Murphy offered critique of the wide-scale and far-reaching transformations of American society under the Reagan administration by means of targeted objective national reality, human nature and reason, language and body humor, in which racial identity was created as a performance made believable by the body that performed it. The creation of “Mr. White” had Murphy donning whiteface makeup as a “deliberate subversion in which the joke is on the white folks.” When Murphy openly engages the politics of Negro subversion to demonstrate the substrata of white privilege, “[w]hat makes the skit such a brilliant critique is Murphy’s over-the-top physical mimicry, his too-perfect embodiment of whiteness. The entire joke relies on our recognition of those subtler elements of his performance, even if we only remember it as Eddie Murphy in ‘whiteface’” (Guterl, 2015: 163). The trickster bravado of the “Stagolee dimension,” merged with the manners and intellect of “the Proper Negro profile” attacks identification, exploitation, penetration, and manipulation of race and class, even as it indicts hegemonic deception and repression for their role in cultural and racial subversion.

There are those who would argue that Murphy is a direct performance descendent and comedic beneficiary of Richard Pryor, but I contend that this lineage is inaccurate because of the difference in “leading man” status, and placement of both actors in 1980s blockbuster films. Tate extends that consideration by supposing that Murphy proved himself “capable of parodying white psyches in a less threatening way than Pryor [and] as a result, he’s more race-leveling” (Tate, 52). During the Murphy Moment, Pryor’s work is not focused on singular stardom within the frame of Hollywood’s moneymaking blockbuster and sequel practice. Lacking the access of Murphy’s *SNL* performances, Pryor’s work, was equally not accessible through the repeatable medium of cable television, thus reducing the connection that Tate suggests is necessary for

“race-leveling” to occur. Rather, Pryor’s most significant film work is done in partnership with other comedians, most notably with Gene Wilder.

Murphy also differs significantly from Pryor because of the interventions of the televised space provided by *SNL* as both national and syndicated programming, and the VCR which offered spectator access at-will to the Murphy performance and persona. I contend that it is not only the result of Murphy’s impressive talent, but that it is as a function of that talent, its occurrence in post-racial America, the technological advent and access of reproducible and recordable VCR technology, and film narrative influenced by the parody and pastiche of classical Hollywood narratives and 1970s Blaxploitation films, that he became an international star and cultural resource.

For the purposes of this study, the Eddie Murphy Moment is defined by the impact of Murphy’s *SNL* performances, the VCR, and the socioeconomic conditions of the 1980s, which defined a post-Blaxploitation era of film, television, and black performance. Evidenced by the cultural phenomenon surrounding Murphy’s performance and generative impact on film, especially as they relate to the period between 1980 and 1989, with the powerful additions of his standup comedy and the formation of Eddie Murphy productions, Murphy’s movement through independent film became a substantive factor in reshaping the form, production, and distribution models of film comedy and independent film. Murphy’s ability to breach race, class and culture has proven undeniable, and, while I fully agree with Kat Williams’s assessment of Eddie Murphy as a comedy god, scholarly discourse has not yet assessed the symbiotic relationship between the talent, technology, and industry at the core of the elemental Murphy magic. This study considers the synergy that works as the driving force of the Murphy Moment as connecting to the ancient folklore and myth of the trickster.

Traditionally conceived, the trickster is a semi-divine cultural hero appearing in the ancient oral folklore and myths of many cultures. Commonly discussed in the fields of religious or cultural anthropological studies, trickster figures are in continual transit through all realms, marginal and liminal, and notorious for their creative breaking of borders. Mercurial in nature, tricksters are physically and emotionally unstructured, gluttons for self-expression, impossible to comprehend or understand, and always potentially toxic. As peculiarly outcast characters whose frequently bizarre activities are often marginally legal, temporally out-of-bounds, and randomly out-of-order, no borders are sacred. The trickster is both the bringer of knowledge and the breaker of rules in order to create new ones. Driven by “the pitfalls and heights of being human” (Bassil-Morozow, 2011: 4), as the trickster, Murphy is the embodiment of all complimentary opposites, but in particular of the binary found between immediate gratification and the demands of civilization. Bassil-Morozow holds that as a guiding characteristic, “[t]he trickster lives along the class divisions, in the existential gaps of urban living, in the civilisedly individualistic notion of ‘personal space’, and in the complex system of social etiquette that effectively separates and labels people” (Bassil-Morozow, 2012: 2).

In myth and folklore, tricksters tend to be ambiguous and anomalous in their embodiment of opposites, even as they are capable of shape-shifting in response to the need for situation inversions. And, as known deceivers, tricksters are particularly skilled at manipulation of the interstitial space between the sacred and the profane, the points between now and then, fertility and impotence, and the lewd and the scatological. It is the lewd and scatological part of the trickster persona, engaged by language as identity and criticism, and joined by the shape-shifting manipulation of interstitial space between the sacred and the profane found in 1980s

television and film that becomes a significant part of Murphy's comedic path from standup comedian to narratively subversive comic film god.

The trickster principles concerned with appreciation of the nature and expression of art work as critical devices for assessing the powerfully persuasive conventional narrative borders constructed by dominant film and television discourse. As a televisual and cinematic trickster, Murphy engaged these borders as bridges by highlighting the liminal spaces in-between what exists, and what could be on the other side of the bridge through technology, industry production shifts, and media distribution. Balancing between the making and breaking of communal and industry norms by questioning or criticizing existing systems, Murphy represents a multiplicity of voices and serves to reveal their controlling nature by creating counter-discourses able to cross naturalized borders.

In the creation of counter-discourses, language (physical, verbal, or written) is used by individuals with social histories. Ferdinand de Saussure defines language as a system of signs used for communication⁴. The signs are man-made and arbitrary in their creation and use of artificial signs (words), and work as a group social phenomenon. Considering words and language as natural phenomena, affected by deep grammatical structure, de Saussure further considers the basic function of language as communication and identity. Drawing a distinction between language (*langue*) and the activity of speaking (*parole*), speaking is an activity of the individual, while language is the social manifestation of speech. Following the line of sociality, Henry Louis Gates' concept of the "Signifying Monkey"⁵ considers language as a reflexive and

⁴ de Saussure, F. (2011). General principles. In C. Bally, A. Sechehaye, & A. Riedlinger (Eds.), *Course in General Linguistics* (W. Baskin, Trans.) (pp. 68-73).

⁵ Gates, Jr., H. L. (1989). The signifying monkey and the language of signifyin(g): Rhetorical difference and the orders of meaning. In *The signifying monkey: A theory of African-American literary criticism* (pp. 44-86).

dynamic product of the social, historical and political contexts of an individual's lived experiences. Lived experience, according to Gates, forms the meaning-making practices employed in producing and reading language. These practices are bound by conventions of construction and interpretation which allow language producers to use other people's language to convey their own compositional ideas, by signifying.

In the speaking and signifying functions of language, the trickster finds the tools for narrative subversion. The identity functions of language in standup and film comedy lend themselves to trickster signifying practices within groups, by subverting lines of race, class and culture. In signifying or *parole*, the trickster bends language into a narrative that group members use to not only distinguish whether a stranger belongs to their group or not, but to also recognize which other group that person belongs, as narrative and meaning shift. In trickster practice, narrative subversion uses this language-as-identity function to blur group lines, allowing and encouraging critique and exchange across liminal borders of race, class, and culture.

Operating from the position of the trickster, Murphy, television, and film combine to reconstruct recordable and repeatable ways of identifying race, class, and culture, by creating an alternative sense of community. A knowledge transformer in the Murphy Moment, the trickster aesthetic and economy freely cross boundaries, linking talent, technology, and industry to challenge the existing Hollywood order by radically reconfiguring it, and creating a new model by fusing production and distribution boundaries and narratively creating new social knowledge (Bassil-Morozow, 2012; Nakanishi, 2004: 61-80). Within the liminal space of alternative community, Murphy becomes a resistant and resilient symbol of the survival and vitality of non-dominant class and culture. Through his industry influenced trickster positionality as both performer and producer, Murphy is able to rebut the undergirding stereotypes of hegemony by

instigating an active negotiation between audiences and the perspectives of film narratives – thereby suggesting modes of navigating a diverse and multicultural “real” world.

The platform for Murphy’s standup, television and film roles is centered in the “cut,” a space found in the interstices of the 1980s New Hollywood.⁶ The urban context of the term is accepted to mean: off to the side; a space off the main drag. Actions in the “cut” include laying low and waiting for an opportunity to make an advantageous move; patiently waiting to get the advantage over someone; or quietly timing a moneymaking move using the element of surprise. F. D. Alcorn suggests that the “cut” is also an interstitial habitus, or a space of ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that occurs in the normally closed spaces of industry traditions (Alcorn, 2016: 11-31). The habitus of Murphy’s “cut” is acquired through imitation (mimesis) and enculturation and is built on the reality that individuals are media-literate, socialized, and complicit in a system of disorder, which includes their individual experience and opportunities.

On its own, Murphy’s work in the “cut” asserts and reconstructs ways to understand U.S. race, class, and culture through the language and subversive humor of the trickster persona that Helena Basil-Morozow suggests characteristically reflects psychological, economic, and social changes in society. Bassil-Morozow holds that this occurs, in part, because “the trickster lives along the class divisions, in the existential gaps of urban living, in the civilisedly individualistic notion of ‘personal space’, and in the complex system of social etiquette that effectively separates and labels people,” as do Murphy’s comedic creations (Bassil-Morozow, 2013: 2). As a cultural product, structured around race and class, Murphy’s 1980s film and television work is important because of its usefulness in situating the path of film comedy, race, class, narrative,

⁶ This study defines the “cut” as the liminal space in which New Hollywood’s economic, technological, and industrial tolerance for form, race, and narrative ambiguity stretched to accommodate radical change in U.S. culture.

and the social critique of standup comedy in the greater discourse of progressive and independent black film. This work is also important because it situates Murphy as both a cinematic and televisual trickster capable of deconstructing and thriving in the liminal spaces of film, television, and popular culture (Bassil-Morozow, 2013: 61; Kornfeld, 2002). When the Murphy Moment is viewed through the lens of traditional film theory, with a cinematic trickster at the helm, a radical shift in 1980s narrative, technology, class, and race, becomes visible, and the shift demands hypothetical revision and reinterpretation of film comedy.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Outside of, and subsequent to Murphy's work on *SNL*, there are three 1980s Murphy films to be considered as primary examples of the actor's success with and manipulation of the kind of structural narrative subversion⁷ of race, class, and culture, examined by this study. *48 Hours* (1982), *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984), and *Coming to America* (1988), all stand out as quintessential 1980s films⁸ and referent sources for the study of Murphy as a creative and progressive radical intermediating agent for film comedy. This study considers *Beverly Hills Cop* as an optimum site for examining Murphy's comedy, narrative subversion, and intervening trickster practices, because of its place at the center of the Murphy Moment.

Very little scholarly work has looked at the phenomenon of Murphy's influence on 1980s cinema, and the sway of the trickster. In failing to consider the trickster interventions of

⁷ For the purposes of this research, narrative subversion is defined as a process by which the values and principles of a spoken or written account of connected events (i.e. a story) are contradicted, reversed, or otherwise disordered, in an attempt to reshape the myths and ideologies of an established social order and its structures of power, authority, hierarchy, and norms.

⁸ Quintessential 1980s films are considered to have specific qualities, including: short easily relatable cinematic plots, emphasis on film franchises, big star identification, product differentiation, and studio driven high concept film models. "High concept, product differentiation, and the contemporary US film industry." Justin Wyatt (1991). Also see Bordwell, David (20 November 2008). "Observations on film art: It's the 80s, stupid."

Murphy's persona, evolving technology, and new Hollywood business practices, a moment of radical transformation is missed. This moment of transformation works to affect film narrative and this subversion of narrative works, in turn, to affect race, class, and culture in film comedy. In failing to inspect the Murphy Moment, and analyzing Murphy as a cinematic trickster, a gap surfaces in the study surrounding American film comedy and race, class, and culture in film comedy.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to inspect the space where Eddie Murphy's trickster persona joins with the trickster modes of Hollywood film business practices to produce the subversive narrative of the Eddie Murphy Moment. By focusing on these trickster interventions, this study holds that the narrative subversion that allowed and encouraged shifting definitions of race, class, and culture in film comedy will become visible by looking at two specific questions surrounding Murphy's work in film: 1) Where does Murphy's trickster persona join with trickster modes of Hollywood film business practices to produce the subversive narrative found in the Eddie Murphy Moment, and 2) How do trickster interventions influence subversive narrative in the Eddie Murphy Moment? The Eddie Murphy Moment occurs at that point when the standup comedian becomes both visible and invisible through trickster influence, and is pivotal to an examination of the evolution of race, identity, and cultural narrative in 1980s American film comedy.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Movies became a substantial favorite form of U.S. entertainment in the early 1900s, outdistancing and finally eclipsing vaudeville in the 1930s (Corrigan & White, 2018), leaving room for a new form of live comedy – standup. From its inception, as viewed through the early work of groundbreaking comedians like Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl in the 1950s, standup

comedy has found a way to address social implications, and offer critical investigation of race, class, and gender. Political in nature, a primary focalizer⁹ of standup comedy is its fearless choice of material and the use of language as identity, and the physicality through which it is delivered (Limon, 2000).

1980s standup comedy found its way into television and film, largely as a commentary on its historical time and space, with a brand of comedy that demonstrated its facility through genre, narrative and tradition. Masters of the craft offered brilliant social and political commentary, genius-level observational skills, and legendary command of the English language, and many were not strangers to obscenity (Double, 2000). Comedians like Richard Pryor further courted comic controversy with bluntly vivid observations on race and their own personal demons, often paving the way to successful television and film careers in the post-civil rights, newly named post-racial conditions of the U.S. (Limon, 2000: McClusky, 2008).

Drawing form and technique from early variety and comedy programming such as *The Ed Sullivan Show* (1948-1971), *The Tonight Show* (1954-present), *Rowan and Martin's Laugh In* (1968-1973), *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (1967-1970), and the improvisational sketch programming of Canada's *Second City Television* (1976-1984), U.S. network television provided access to a new arena for critical comedy. This critical form of comedy grows out of the joining of standup with comedian comedy. In *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, Karnick and Jenkins refer to the critical comedy that works in the interstices of Hollywood film, television, and variety performance tradition, as comedian comedy. Comedian comedy, including slapstick and other

⁹ For the purposes of this study, the term focalizer is defined through Edward Branigan's 1992 study, *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, as the primary consciousness relative to the understanding of knowledge of a story, though the acquired data is not always demonstrated solely through the story's narrator or main character (Branigan, 192: 76).

physical comedy, tends to be highly amenable to an individually featured performer, as opposed to partnered performance. Characterized through its relationship to unresolved, abstruse, and difficult subjects – not unlike issues of race, class, gender, and culture – comedian comedy places its credibility, and roots its humor, in the personality and concern of the performer (Karnick & Jenkins, 1995: 3-5).

The complex aesthetic of comedian comedy engages “fragmentation [by] privileging performance over characterization, focus on spectacle over narrative, and a stylistic self-consciousness,” as necessary informants to cultural critique (Karnick & Jenkins, 1995: 4). Comedian comedy has proven particularly responsive to the format and audience of programs such as *SNL* which required a highly current and topical mode of comedic generation outside of Hollywood film and variety performance traditions. In the case of *SNL*, comedian comedy’s use of documentary tropes, animation, and standup comedy, created a performance gap that allowed for the privileging of the fragmentation of “performance over characterization” and “stylistic self-consciousness.”

This performance gap revealed itself in 1980, when *SNL*, in its fifth year, leaning heavily on a sketch comedy interlaced variety format, developed programming issues. Feeling that its demographic would best respond to the addition of another African-American male, after the departure of Garrett Morris, the *SNL* slot fatefully opened for a new actor – Eddie Murphy. With an initial single appearance contract, which was ultimately extended for four years, Murphy was able to showcase the talent and cognitive insight that made him a fully-qualified comedic star performer (Hill, D., & Weingrad, J., 2011: 317-321). It is this star performance that inaugurates the film period that this study refers to as the Eddie Murphy Moment.

This study considers the 1980-1984 *SNL* performances as the origin space that positioned Murphy to study and hone comedic characterizations in the trickster tradition: the trickster position is marked by a dynamic between restraint and breakthrough that chooses to speak to positional absurdity (Bassil-Morozow, 2013: 4). These performances examined individualism, national identity, race, culture, and government practice. On the surface, the Murphy Moment seems to have occurred suddenly, allowing fluid access to Hollywood interventions, which generated a smoothly celebrated career, simply accepted as a “given,” and attributed to innate talent. This study contends that the Murphy Moment owes as much to technological trickster interventions, and its historical place and time, as it does to the star’s talent.

Delineated by Murphy’s *SNL* performances and the films *48 Hours*, *Beverly Hills Cop* and *Coming to America*, the Eddie Murphy Moment offers insight into the work of critical film comedy, race, pastiche, and parody as progressive radical interventions for film. Historical evidence to be found within the context of the Eddie Murphy Moment, suggests that as film comedy and the Hollywood production and distribution models changed to accommodate a black star, and his work, through trickster interventions,¹⁰ served as agents of radical change, capable of producing transformations in social and material cinematic structures, creating a conceptual scaffold that is capable of reading the interaction between technology and social discourse through film narrative, race, class, and culture.

¹⁰ Leora Kornfeld suggests that there are times when technology is not just a tool, but also a teacher, and an assumptive trickster – especially in the sense that the trickster is prone to seizing something for itself in the course of change, as technology adapts productive methods to critique, engage, and advance arguments. The VCR and the advance of cable and 24-hour television as technological tools exist in a moment when technology is engaged in the business of sharing information and logic, becoming a trickster in the business of manipulating spectators who become complicit in the magical business bordering the new technological trick (Kornfeld, 2002).

2.1 Post-racial U.S.

The term “post-racial” was created for an October 5, 1971, *New York Times* article titled “Compact Set Up for ‘Post-Racial’ South.” In the article, a group of politicians and academics used the term to describe what they ideologically believed to be “an era in which race relations are soon to be replaced as a major concern by population increase, industrial development, and economic fluctuations” (Wooten, 1971). Film theorists Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni would argue through their essay, “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” that the generation of this ideology depends upon the existing status quo and an aesthetic that implicitly depends on ideological cultural dominants (Comolli and Narboni, 1971: 815-816).

The prevailing ideology of the 1980s responded to the cultural conflicts engendered by the cumulative effect of overlapping economic, social, and military setbacks born in the wake of the countercultural social revolutions of the 1960s, and the government fueled racial discord based in policies on school desegregation and affirmative action, which had spread beyond the South to infect much of the country. Finding no need to extend civil rights protections, Ronald Reagan effectively considered the U.S. to be “post-racial” and no longer in need of federal remedies (Bush, 2011). The resulting nationwide pessimism set the stage for a profound and transformative moment in American history – a moment where principles that had structured U.S. politics since the 1930s New Deal and shaped the civil rights era, failed, leaving Americans ready for the radical change brought on by the fundamental realignment of American politics that ideologically infused 1980s American cinema.

A key component to Comolli and Narboni’s argument about the ideological effects of the cinema is the fact that while people do look to cinema and television for spectacle and entertainment they don’t expect to notice the work of it, even as they are watching the

progression of the projected images. The production and ideology surrounding television shows like *SNL* and 1980s films is historically situated in the early years of the Reagan presidential administration (1981-1989); this administration, according to editor Peter C. Rollins introduces American film and film audiences to “the trendsetter for 1980s film representations... Ronald Reagan, a former film actor who repeatedly employed film images and references to advance his historical goals” (Rollins, 2003: 42). Under Reagan, “the major social, political issues of the 1980s – winning the Vietnam War ten years after the fact, the New Patriotism, saber-rattling détente with Russia’s ‘evil empire,’ renewed fears of nuclear holocaust, the federal deficit, the self-indulgent Yuppie (Young Urban Professionals, and Buppie, Black Urban Professionals) lifestyle, a ‘neo-racism’ against Asians much different from that of the World War II era – were in many respects both inspired and exploited by Reagan” (Rollins, 2003: 42).

Within this decade, the United States saw an 11.4% population increase over the previous decade. The early 1980s also saw “rising unemployment, declining unionization, and policy failures like the failure to raise the minimum wage, and lax enforcement of anti-discrimination laws [which] contributed to the growing black-white wage gap” (Wilson & Rodgers III, 2016). However, specifically viewed as post-racial were the federal passage of H.R. 3663, the Bus(ing) Regulatory Reform Act of 1982, a 25-year extension of the Voter Rights Act (1982), and the election of Chicago’s first African American mayor (1983). Nomination of Jesse Jackson as the second African American presidential candidate (1984), along with passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, led to cinematic reflection on political expectations of equality. Expectations of equality were encouraged as the Huxtables, an attractive socially-integrated African American family, became a sustaining part of the television landscape in the form of *The Cosby Show* (1984). Inquiries of feminist roles, redefinitions of family in both public and private

spaces, gang and drug affiliations, inspection of environmental engagement, and questioning of governmental intervention in healthcare, especially with reference to the recently defined crack cocaine and AIDS epidemics all found their way into 1980s film (Rollins, 2003: 42).

Socially, in part as a response to television, cinematic audiences changed with the advent of multiplex exhibition venues. Multiplex theaters were larger, offered a broad range of amenities, presented more film choices, and drew from larger geographic areas, making them a preferable choice to smaller local theaters (Corrigan & White, 2009). Television and cinema were jointly impacted by expanded, audience-specific programming – including that of MTV, CNN, and FOX, along with reproducible new technology in the form of videotape which allowed for time-shifting the recording of films and other television programs directly from their televised transmission. The videocassette recorder, which had evolved from its 1970s incarnation into a functional cost-effective unit, was now capable of bringing both cinema and recordable, repeatable, television programming into the home (Levy, 1984).

2.2 Postmodernism, Pastiche, and Parody in Comedy

As a concept developed in the late 20th century, postmodernism is generally understood as a creative style in arts, architecture and criticism that represents a departure from modernism and holds, at its heart, the idea that “real” truth does not exist. Rather, postmodernism claims that knowledge is not objectively discovered; instead, knowledge is always produced. With a general distrust of grand theories and ideologies, as well as authenticity, postmodernism asserts that all ideas and facts are believed instead of known because knowledge is formed by people, ultimately creating a problematic relationship with any notion of “art” through questions of discontinuity, cultural gaps, and style progression (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001: 362-363). Postmodernism addresses the space occupied by the trickster as

both human and technological agent, lurking in the gaps of this problematic relationship with art, race, and culture, as a metaphor for psycho-anthropological concepts of change. Acting as an impulse that challenges the existing order of things, the trickster is a progressive force that is so far outside of structure, as to be anti-structural in its nature, which does not coincide with the homogenous normality of the mass social system, existing political ideology, or other hegemonic authority (Bassil-Morozow, 2012: 29-36, 47-62, 74).

Specific traits of film and comedy linked to the trickster aesthetic include: playfulness and self-reference, popular culture references, challenging narrative structures, pastiche, intertextuality, bricolage,¹¹ magical realism, and the mixing of high and low culture (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001: 364). Reflexivity that functions as a distancing mode, is also a part of the trickster aesthetic. Reflexivity prevents viewers from being completely absorbed in the illusion of a filmic experience also embraces ludic negotiation between high and low humor, as it breaks the boundaries of image and narrative. The cinematic trickster also uses narratives to mirror the current state of the human condition and western culture (Bassil-Morozow, 2012: 52-53, 157).

In combination with parody and pastiche, reflexivity engages audiences through the consumption of visual and verbal information, while teaching audiences how the information should be interpreted through events or circumstances that evoke specific functional reactions. Bassil-Morozow considers reflexivity to be an “ideal playground for the trickster who thrives in ‘liminoid’ areas,” especially those associated with film, media, images, culture and mass participation (Bassil-Morozow, 2012: 58-61). Catherine Constable suggests that the stimuli surrounding verbal communication, including actor, narrative, *mise-en-scène*, sound, and historic

¹¹ This study employs the term bricolage as representing something, including film narratives, as constructed or created from a diverse range of available things.

place in time, also have meaning which may or may not be consistent or compatible with dialogue selected and controlled by hegemonic community (Constable, 2004: 58-59). Reflexivity, in consideration of film comedy, is bound by the stimuli found in metacommunication that indicates ways through which verbal information should be imparted to and interpreted by audiences.

The pastiche of film comedy lies in the film's imitation of classic cinematic traditions. The filmic ideology is lodged in faithful replication of genre and narrative expectations. Comolli and Narboni indicate that one of the jobs of film is to challenge and express the reality of film, and to challenge the film's "ideology [by] presenting itself to itself, talking to itself, learning about itself" (Comolli and Narboni, 1971: 815-816), causing the ideological message of film comedy to resonate with spectators. Hutcheon views practices of pastiche as not being afraid to renegotiate "different possible relations (of complicity and critique) between high and popular forms of culture" (Hutcheon, 2007: 97).

Ideologically, in conversation with its audience, Hutcheon views pastiche as having the ability to criticize the state of the U. S. stance on race, culture, gender, and military defense, while actively waving the flag and urging productive socio-economic parity. Comolli and Narboni would argue that U.S. film and television have always been imbued through and through with the dominant hegemonic ideology in pure and unadulterated form, and that they determinedly ignore awareness of the practice, enabling it to continue to engage and influence spectators (Comolli and Narboni, 1971). Hutcheon indicates that this spectator engagement is made possible in the work of standup and film comedy, because "the work of pastiche is to break down and inform ideology while the work of parody is to imitate, make fun of, or comment on

an original work, its subject, author, style, or some other target, by means of satiric or ironic imitation” (Hutcheon, 1999: 36-37).

In *Practices of Looking*, Sturken and Cartwright observe parody as the imitation of the style of a more serious artistic work or genre through the deliberate use of that genre’s characteristic elements, including plot or character (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001: 361). Though primarily referencing postmodernism, Hutcheon indicates that the willingness of imitation, irony, and humor to reflect societal ideologies means that, “parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies. This kind of transgression makes it a ready vehicle for... political contradictions” (Hutcheon, 2007: 97). In his argument on the place of reverse discourse,¹² Weaver (2010) agrees on the value of political contradictions as a place for constructive parody and pastiche.

2.3 *Film Theory and the 1980s Moment*

Prevailing literature on film and its theory support the notion of the 1980s as offering a specific moment in which to situate an argument for African American film comedy, and its exertion of a generative cultural and racial push against traditional Hollywood norms through parody, pastiche, technology and industry, and filmic representation. In this post-civil rights, post racial “moment,” Hollywood studios were struggling for survival in spite of the successful mid-to-late 1970s industry revival based on high-action youth-oriented films designed to exploit special effects technology through spectacle, like *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975) and *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977).

¹² Here, Weaver (2010) considers the notion that ‘reverse’ discourses are, and should be, constructed against dominant conversations, and as such represent clear sites of resistance to them.

Catherine Constable describes the need for spectacle as a defining factor for the declining economic base of the studios and cultural circumstances that would prove the generators of the New Hollywood (Constable, 2004: 43-64). Thompson and Bordwell point out that spectacle and technology were necessary commercial interventions because plummeting ticket sales and the increased studio production costs that led to overseas location film production as a cost-saving option left the film industry limping along, and in need of the influx of money from international big businesses that eventually took financial control over many movies, and ownership of several of the original “Big Five” film studios¹³ by multi-national industry conglomerates (Thompson & Bordwell, 2009: 696-722). At this point, the film industry, in need of critical overhaul, offers fertile territory for cultural appropriation, and the breakdown of appropriated concepts and materials.

The breaking down of appropriated concepts and materials can be explained through the argument of French theorists, Jean Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni for the notion that as a direct result of their national condition and context, film will fall into one of five distinct categories: (1) Films “imbued through and through with the dominant ideology in pure and unadulterated form, and give no indication that their makers were even aware of the fact...” (2) Films that *attack* their ideological assimilation by either exhibiting political form, or actually being political in content, (3) Films whose content is *not* explicitly political but becomes so through film form and structure that are political, (4) Films with explicitly political content, but whose form and structure adhere to the traditional depictions of reality, and (5) Films which initially seem to be

¹³ The five large film production companies that (from the 1920s) came to be known as “The Big Five” or “The Majors,” were: 20th Century Fox, RKO Pictures, Paramount Pictures, Warner Bros., and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Collectively, the companies led the industry in film production and distribution, and their business structures and practices were recognized as the “studio system” (Thompson & Bordwell, 2009: 696-710).

influenced by dominant ideology but turn out to be so only in an ambiguous manner, so that the content is understood as apolitical in itself (Comolli and Narboni, 1971: 815-816).

Under the influence of international money, population shifts, military conflicts in El Salvador, Libya, and the Persian Gulf, and technological advances, Susan Jeffords indicates a theoretical strain on Hollywood filmmaking that underlines the observations made by Comolli and Narboni. Although Jeffords does not speak directly to race, she does speak to gender and class through her observation of Hollywood's need to construct a new narrative for a U.S. audience seeking a new kind of hero, as a way of addressing national ideology and identity, and politics (Jeffords, 2004: 24-90).

As a response to the space opened by the search for this new film narrative, studios sought to fill the productive economic and filmic gaps with familiar reproducible images and actors, often drawing their players from popular television, without the obvious intent of privileging race or culture. For this reason, theorist Manthia Diawara suggests that this 1980s moment was amenable to the deterritorialization of film. Suggesting that deterritorialization includes the severing of social, political, or cultural practices from their inherent places and populations engages the distancing necessary to allow an African American standup comedian to make the fluid crossings between stage, television, and film. Interestingly, the discriminatory features of black actors and film in classical Hollywood were primarily temporospatial, causing problems with identification and spectatorship.

Diawara theorizes that this occurs because race and post-colonialism stand as the foundations of troublesome misrepresentations of African Americans in film, and that black characters tended to be stagnant in characterization and narrative. Edward Branigan, much like Diawara, considers reproducibility and distribution as being important to anchoring film

narrative. Both theorists also agree that narrative will always embody a judgment based in its ideology, so much so that when an audience views a film, they will always deploy prior and emotional knowledge to create meaning. For Diawara, this results in an argument of resistant spectatorship¹⁴ (Branigan, 1992: Diawara, 1988).

Diawara's argument of resistant spectatorship as a response to the ideology, judgment, and narrative that occur because of race and post-colonialism, creates a viable space for the intervention of both televisual and cinematic tricksters, as disruptors of narrative. Kristin Thompson's theory of cinematic excess supports the trickster disturbance of film narrative because, "[o]utside any such structures lie those aspects of the work which are not contained by its unifying forces – the 'excess'" (Thompson, 1999: 513). As an element of tension, both Thompson and Diawara suggest that excess is essentially both counter-unity and counter-narrative in that it implies a gap or lag in motivation, the tool through which the work is able to make its own devices seem realistic and logical. Exposed motivational gaps and lags in narrative – as in the societal gaps that expose race, class, culture, and gender – depend upon the excess found in multiple cinematic elements that demonstrate the illogical and arbitrary nature of narrative to disrupt, distort, and critique (Diawara, 1988: Thompson, 1999).

Edward Branigan connects cinematic excess to narrative by expanding upon Raymond Bellour's notion that "some elements inevitably escape tight narrative structure and become a residuum, an 'excess,' revealing hidden psychic and ideological processes at work in the text" (Branigan, 1992: 10). Extension of this notion suggests that cinematic excess also works to

¹⁴ Resistant spectatorship occurs when a spectator (or group of spectators) understand a film's intended message but draw their own meaning from the film by defying (resisting) dominant cultural values as they are presented onscreen (Diawara, 1988).

reveal the hidden critique that is found in the gaps and lags of film comedy. In his further analysis of narrative comprehension and film, Branigan, like Diawara, looks at narrative as being a cognitive, self-reflexive relationship between cause and effect (Branigan, 1992: 33-37).

Branigan differs from Diawara, in that he draws from cognitive science to theorize the agency of individual film shots: at shot level, he finds that film agents are related to several degrees of narration that allow access to race, class, and culture. The cause and effect relationship found between the degrees of narration operates through five specific plot agents: historical authors, implied authors, narrators, characters, and focalizers (Branigan, 1992). The category of focalizers¹⁵ is considered to be the most important of these plot agents and fits most closely with Hollywood's need for and use of an African American standup comedian, imported from popular television.

2.4 *Colorblind "Othered" Comedic Space and Hipster Racism*

The comedic practices of 1980s film and television were designed to appeal to young, urban, professional, and educated, primarily white audiences (Rollins, 2007: 42-46). Isabel Molina-Guzmán uses the term "hipster" to collectively identify these audience members and finds that their relationship to humor is camouflaged by a specific and determined ignorance of the "other." Comolli and Narboni would consider this phase of "othering" as a function of U.S. and Hollywood ideology.¹⁶ However, Powell and Menéndian recognize the process and power of

¹⁵ Branigan defines focalization as reflection that involves a character neither speaking (narrating, reporting, communicating) nor acting (focusing, focused by), but rather actually experiencing something through seeing or hear seeing or hearing it. Focalization also extends to more complex experiencing of objects: thinking, remembering, interpreting, wondering, fearing, believing, desiring, understanding, or feeling guilt (Branigan, 1992).

¹⁶ Comolli and Narboni (1971) hold that as a result of being a material product of the system that produces it, film, television, and commodified standup comedy are also ideological products of the system; thus, every performance is political inasmuch as it is determined by the ideology which produces it.

the broad racism that undergirds hipster racism and suggest that “‘othering’ is a term that not only encompasses the many expressions of prejudice on the basis of group identities, but we argue that it provides a clarifying frame that reveals a set of common processes and conditions that propagate group-based inequality and marginality” (Powell and Menendian, 2016).

Within the dynamic framework of “othering,” Molina-Guzmán finds that “audiences of post-racial era comedies are [able] to understand that hipster humor is socially inappropriate [even as they] see themselves as socially conscious. [P]ost Racial, comedies allow white audiences to laugh at or even sympathize with racist... language and behavior as these are normalized as the result of individuals’ inability to adjust to the new mores of a more socially conscious culture” (Molina-Guzmán, 2018). Leora Kornfeld suggests that film comedy treats this colorblindness as a social appropriation through “a simultaneous deployment of the ‘tactics of the weak’ and ‘strategies of the strong,’ styles of resistance” that allows trickster access and insinuation into media spaces that speak to the dominant culture, working to break and subvert norms and standards (Kornfeld, 2002: 128-129).

In the embrace of a colorblind ethos bound by a post-racial U.S. popular culture ideology that “depends on the ability to see skin color and understand socially appropriate behavior even as audiences ignore the significance of color, race, or ethnicity to U.S. political and cultural life,” Molina-Guzmán finds that film and television comedy can neutralize the presence of the “other.” She further indicates that colorblindness “depends on the everyday invisibility of white privilege, even as ethnic and racial inequalities persist,” both in the television world, and in the wider world beyond the home television screen (Molina-Guzman, 2018). Powell and Menendian (2016) stand in full agreement with Molina-Guzmán by viewing “othering” as a “set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across

any of the full range of human differences based on group identities.” Understanding and relying upon hipster racism allows film and television narrative “increased agency to portray socially unacceptable and legally actionable behaviors and language, and it is that cultural transgression that produces the humor” (Molina-Guzmán, 2018) through the audiences’ familiarity with the stereotypical and anticipated actions. Kornfeld further suggests that by juggling aesthetic genres and narrative language through media, the televisual trickster is able to reconstitute racial and social codes in such a way as to question the ironies of hipster racism by raising a new and resistant voice (Kornfeld, 2002: 128-129).

A key element of post-racial television programming provides for the normalizing of hipster racism through the inclusion of “the development of sympathetic yet socially flawed white lead characters” (Molina-Guzmán, 2018), to underscore the framing of the “othered” characters. Here, “othering” becomes a “broadly inclusive term, but [one] sharp enough to point toward a deeper set of dynamics, suggesting something fundamental or essential about the nature of group-based exclusion” (Powell and Menendian, 2016). The caveat is that “the effectiveness of hipster racism depends on a shared agreement that the white lead character’s flaws are socially innocent and not institutionally and intentionally systemic” (Molina-Guzmán, 2018).

Molina-Guzmán defines a vision of post-racial hipster racism that can be seen to extend beyond home or personal televiewing. She contends that hipster racism makes use of the “absence of the laugh track and the colorblind form of comedy that depends on racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual preference... to reinforce the colorblind values even as character differences are increasingly central to the production of laughter... mak[ing] it possible for audiences to hold contradictory readings... [and form] interpretations that release audiences of white guilt or social

discomfort yet create a contested space of visibility and subversive pleasure for audiences of color (Doane, 2014)” (Molina-Guzmán, 2018).

2.5 *The Magical Negro*

It is necessary to investigate the Magical Negro as a way of situating “othering” in 1980s film and television, and in comedy as a genre. The term Magical Negro was popularized by film director Spike Lee, while discussing films with students during a 2001 tour of college campuses. Dismayed by what he considered as Hollywood's decision to continue employing this premise, Lee described the Magical Negro as a trope created by white people, in which the character is typically, but not always, “in some way outwardly or inwardly disabled, either by discrimination, disability or social constraint” (Gonzalez, 2001). Concerned that in order for the characterizations of African Americans on television and film to change, Lee told his audience that blacks needed to achieve positions of power in those industries, where they can control the images that are produced and perpetuated (Gonzalez, 2001).

In similar conversation, Donald Bogle also considers the Magical Negro as a broken and troublesome stereotype that pays only lip service to racism, without making critical comment. Considering this character as an invented sort of cinematic *deus ex machina* whose sole purpose is to connect loose plot points by providing a contrived solution to an apparently insoluble hegemonic difficulty, Bogle further holds that this character potentially exploits racism in favor of whiteness to spite critical comment by comingling limited progress with traditionally racist stereotypes, thereby taking no stand, at all – subsequently reducing the Magical Negro to placeholder status (Bogle, 2001: 245-249).

A counter to this notion is the narrative concern that the Magical Negro is not broken; rather, this character serves a subversive and critical purpose through the breaking or repurposing

of stable referents as “norms against which behaviors may be deemed [appropriate or expected]” (Auslander, 2004: 107-108). This suggests repurposing the oppressive tropes of Bogle’s sly Buck or lazy trickster through the use of fragmentary texts repurposed through the parody of psychologically consistent actions in the service of agency, as opposed to oppression. Colombe furthers this concept through the understanding that although the Magical Negro character often has a minimally defined past, and occupies a liminally defined space, narratively adjacent to the white protagonist – thus placing him in a comedic “buddy” status that offers character agency, as opposed to a position solely defined by oppression and subservience. Countering race through “buddy” status, the Magical Negro is able to credibly access a biased state of association that allows critique of race and class (Colombe, 2002).

When the Magical Negro is viewed as a cinematic trickster, Helena Bassil-Morozow proposes that he or she is a liminal being who cannot be easily placed in a single category of social world existence. Rather, Bassil-Morozow’s characterization suggests that the Counter-Magical Negro is a reflection of social economic and psychological culture formations, and will always negotiate between high and low humor as they break boundaries of image and narrative. And, in direct contradiction of Bogle’s notions, Bassil-Morozow contends that the cinematic trickster will always infect its audience with a spirit of mischief, and endure ridicule in the process, in order to uncover, critique, and mirror narratives of Western culture, ultimately saving them through laughter (Bassil-Morozow, 2013: 120-140).

As a comedic 1980s evolution of the Magical Negro, the Counter-Magical Negro is not magical in the sense of supernatural powers, nor does he attempt to wield or control uncanny sources. Bassil-Morozow proposes that as tricksters, the Counter-Magical Negro source of choice is “born out of individual curiosity and individual rebellion, fed on media and cinema”

and their ability to use film, mass media, popular culture, and technology to engage people (Bassil-Morozow, 2013: 60-61). The true magic of the Counter-Magical Negro lies in identity, narratively accessible personal history, and having the ability to define for himself who and what he is. This is accomplished by appropriation of the oppositional gaze (hooks, 1992), through which the Counter-Magical Negro may be understood as daring to look at himself and the characters around him, and in looking, he performs a revolutionary act. By pushing against the traditional probe and objectification of hegemonic male gaze, the Counter-Magical Negro resists the oppression of race and cultural expectations through the generation of multiple other gazes, including a gaze of recognition and a gaze of interrogation.

In part, as a function of reverse discourse, the Counter-Magical Negro does not invest himself in naturopathy and folklore, nor does he have an inclination toward folksy humor. Rather, the spectatorial options of the Counter-Magical Negro are invested in resistance to the identification of traditional racial representations of dominant cinema, which Manthia Diawara considers as resistant spectatorship. Much like hooks, Diawara finds this resistance to stand in defiance of the traditional Hollywood traditions of hegemonic male gazes.

The Counter-Magical Negro exists in a narrative space that serves to selectively parse, challenge, and shrewdly cut Hollywood characters into parts that must relate to the black character by softening and erasing boundaries, in order to simultaneously render race, class, and cultural boundaries more pronounced.¹⁷ Molina-Guzmán (2018) considers this space to be open to spectator interpretation, but Diawara considers this area of understanding to be the stronghold

¹⁷ It is my contention that Comolli and Narboni (1971) would consider Counter-Magical Negroes to be those black characters who seem at first sight to belong within the traditionally hegemonic Hollywood and U.S. racial ideology and be under its sway, but who, in the course of the film's narrative, turn out to be so only in an ambiguous manner or not at all.

of the resisting spectator. Within the visual and narrative power spaces of the Counter-Magical Negro, the asymmetry of hegemonic racial power, as a controlling force in cinema, is shifted through the force of resistant spectator identification and a shift from the objectification of the male gaze (Diawara, 1988).

2.6 *The Bridge Effect*

Many who study the topic of film and television comedy argue the ability of humor to bridge cultural divides. Others insist that humor's reliance on stereotyping often perpetuates racism, sexism, and classism through the othering of the comedians and the environment that frames their performance (Molina-Guzmán, 2018). Although scholars express opposing views about the effects of certain kinds of humor, they acknowledge its power to persuade or influence our thinking. These various funny disciplines and their scholars employ different approaches and often stress the different aspects and effects of humor; however, they all assume that humor involves a degree of creativity and the capacity for conceptual understanding and conceptual shifts. Furthermore, many scholars argue that humor is a uniquely human characteristic "because of its significant role in the following three areas: identity (ontology), culture, and knowledge or meaning-making (epistemology)" (Cucinella, 2015).

Intuitively, bridges are understood to function as objects that encourage movement and connection. Further, a bridge provides common ground and a public space, whereupon one is able to confront and mediate one's own boundaries in order to meet the boundaries of another. A bridge offers an exemplary place of confrontation and neutrality, from which sheer possibility is forged and then extended into surrounding space. The surrounding comedic space is highly urban and often defined by attitudes of skepticism and irony that challenge reality through a comedy lens through which an African American comic presentation "endeavors to experience the 'truth'

of white privilege” (Guterl, 2015: 163). The phenomenon of the African American comic, as a film or television performer, has always been the ability to avoid deracination in the negotiation of this bridge. As a functional pastiche, African American comedians frequently use language as a signifier of identity, and verbal speed as a source of tension for changes of meaning needed to bridge race, class, and culture (Bucholtz & Lopez, 2011).

In bridging race, class, and culture, African American comedic film and standup comedy can offer a reverse discourse that is able to “employ the sign-systems of embodied and cultural racism but develop, or seek to develop, a reverse semantic effect” (Weaver, 2010). As a further extension of the 1980s approach to standup, television, and film comedy, the genre evolved to combine a gendered post-modern sense of race, class, and culture, forming a pastiche dedicated to bridging pre-civil rights delineations of race (Haggins, 2007). In making this assertion, Haggins holds that 1980s comedy used the force of genre, narrative and tradition to construct the social and political commentary that drew African American comics progressively more central to affecting mainstream culture, while still maintaining the differences of race and class. Historically, African American performers have been able to use comedy as an instructional tool, bridging race relations while the audience is laughing. Realizing that the promise of the bridge is not yet fulfilled, Haggins, like Molina-Guzmán, extends the bridge argument with the notion that the potential of culturally digestible African American comedy, as an “othered” performance, remained fundamentally unfulfilled (Haggins, 2007; Molina-Guzmán, 2018).

Cheng opens the subversive nature of crossing racial bridges by pointing out that the use of body humor in African American comic performance in film and standup comedy affixes specific challenges to “othering” and whiteness through the understanding that “racial bodies embody racial histories. Because of the social history of black denigration and the theatrical

history of minstrelsy, black bodies can occupy certain parodic spaces unimaginable for whites today, at least in progressive circles...” (Cheng, 2001: 183-184). The placement of black bodies and their embodied racial histories into the arena of standup comedy allows those bodies to move into a space of cultural critique, as they address an audience of potentially resistant spectators. Diawara contends that such an audience pushes against content and does not passively accept performance, thereby challenging culture and criticism through their ability to reinterpret, substitute, or fully reject performance in favor of the interpretations conveyed by their lived experiences. In this environment, standup comedy that directly engages race and culture when placed in the parodic spaces of cinema and television screens is able to bridge the space that Cheng suggests is progressively available (Diawara, 1988; Cheng, 2001: 183-184).

The comedic bridge does not stand as a simply passive space that connects one joke or impersonation to another, as if comedy performance itself was a full and complete location of meaning. Rather, the bridge is a span of socially conditioned knowledge claims and value systems situated as products of cultural and political discourses (Colombe, 2002; Bassil-Morozow, 2012: 120-123). Tate offers the consideration that it is not “crazed black genius but black subterfuge” (Tate, 1992: 50-52), building upon parodied and assimilated white psyches and performances, that are essential for constructing the comedic bridge. Auslander considers that in accessing the bridging function of black comedic subversion “[e]ven if the constituent elements in this process reflect postmodern culture and postmodernist aesthetics, the process leaves the apparatus... unchallenged,” allowing access to meaning (Auslander, 2004: 108-109). In bridging comedy through pastiche, parody, self-referentiality and irreverence, the 1980s cultural bridge

connects a unique and powerful historical space of cultural appropriation, cultural diffusion, and cultural relativism.¹⁸

3 METHODOLOGY

The liminally subversive aesthetic and cultural work of the cinematic, televisual, and business trickster is the broad framework chosen for this study. Critical Race theory was utilized to assess 1980s structures of Hollywood film production and distribution, film criticism, and economic conditions, as part of an interlocking system of race, class, and cultural oppression. Narrative analysis, as theorized by Edward Branigan was used in conjunction with the language-as-identity storytelling elements of Critical Race theory, and Helena Bassil-Morozow's trickster principles. The conceptual framework for this study incorporates the cinematic trickster principles of Helena Bassil-Morozow and Terrie Waddell, the televisual trickster principles of Leora Kornfeld, and the business trickster principles of Aki Nakanishi, to access and explain subversions of race, class and culture in American film comedy by a black comedian.

3.1 Primary Sources

The film, *Beverly Hills Cop*, is the primary source used for this study. Historical film budgets, production, distribution, and revenue data (as returns on investment), have been reviewed and analyzed as indicators of cinematic success and markers of subversive narrative. Critical film reviews and contemporary media, including magazine, newspaper, and other media outlet interviews and articles were also reviewed as a way of gauging film distribution and public reception, and Murphy's influence.

¹⁸ Hutcheon (2007: 97-98) considers postmodernism to be an active space of cultural appropriation, diffusion and relativism, even as it works to deny modernism, when modernism is defined as a style or movement in the arts that aims to break with classical and traditional forms of the 19th and 20th centuries. Here, I suggest that the classical and traditional forms of the comic arts are racially oppressive and restrictive.

3.2 Design

Qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) was used to analyze data. With the film *Beverly Hills Cop*, serving as the historical site for investigation of the influence of trickster practices and subversive film narrative. For this study, the term “narrative” is understood to mean story structure determined by the content of a fictional tale¹⁹ and the form used to exhibit the story through image and sound. For this study, the term “story” refers to the elements of dramatic and comedic action interpreted through the lens of the filmmaker and the improvisational skills of key actors.

This study is a multivariate non-experimental examination of the correlation between 1980s film comedy, race and class, narrative subversion, critical response, and changing Hollywood industry standards in a sample of Eddie Murphy’s film work. A multivariate analysis is considered as the most efficient method of investigation for this study because it allows for projected scrutiny of the historical data produced by looking at each variable in isolation. In this design, 1980s film comedy, race, critical media response, and changing Hollywood industry standards are identified as independent variables. The dependent variables, Eddie Murphy and his subversive effect on film narrative, his use of language (as a focalizer of identity), and the film *Beverly Hills Cop*, are observed in relation to the other variables.

¹⁹ The fictional films used for this study are narratively composed along a string of events whose structure depends on cause and effect relationships. While the beginning of a movie and the introduction of certain characters are always arbitrary, subsequent scenes must happen for a clear reason. An identifiable motivation that justifies character behavior, action, and goals is a narrative constant, and though the introduction and use of characters may appear both random and arbitrary, scene continuity is maintained. All action must occur for a clear reason, organized along a main line of action and connected through theme.

3.3 Procedures

To measure Murphy's impact on Hollywood film, IMDb and Box Office Mojo figures – certified as industry standards – have been used to center the status of Murphy's 1980s film presence, production costs, product distribution, profits, and returns on investments. The samples used for this study are limited to *Beverly Hills Cop*, and do not include or access information related to any other Murphy films, or those included in the film franchise. Archived contemporaneous film reviews and articles from both national and international wire services, newspapers, and magazines, have been collected and analyzed to explore public reception of Murphy and his narrative subversion. Primary review sources for this study include, but are not limited to the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Chicago-Sun Times*, *Variety*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, *New York Times*, *Forbes*, and *Time Magazine*. Publications with national audiences were included as a way of giving the widest range of response to the film and its historic and cultural aesthetic placement.

Because it is understood that film reviews, interviews, and wire reportage are subjective, and this study hoped to operate outside of researcher bias, the collected historical reviews and articles were scanned and coded using NVivo software to evaluate specific elements of reviewer response through the development of thematic clusters. This coding process was selected because the NVivo programs are designed for qualitative analysis of rich text-based and multimedia information, such as film, scripts, film reviews, and other contemporary social media, where deep levels of data analysis is required. Organizing the text through NVivo analysis developed thematic clusters that were used to mine the collected data for the use of specific terms, themes, and motifs that expressed Murphy's trickster relationship to narrative subversion.

3.4 Analysis

3.4.1 Overview of the sample

The sample used for this study was limited to a single film, *Beverly Hills Cop*. The sample does not include, or access information related to any of the other three films included in the film franchise. The sample used to frame the Eddie Murphy Moment is composed of twenty-five archived film reviews and fifty related contemporary articles. The study is deepened by accessing the film's budget and return on investment, both drawn from historical film ratings and reviews found in the professional listings of the International Movie Database (IMDb Pro) and Box Office Mojo. Three scenes from the film *Beverly Hills Cop* are analyzed to demonstrate the use of Murphy's trickster access to subversive narrative. The sample also includes an NVivo analysis of the film's ratings and reviews to organize the initially unstructured data clusters found in the broad array of articles and reviews of *Beverly Hills Cop*. This analysis is used to locate and code themes and scene-centered notes on narrative, subversion, race, class, and culture.

In line with other film and cultural studies, when assessing the performance and success of a single film, it was deemed important to look at the performance of the film's cinematic competition. This was accomplished by observing the other top performing films of 1984. *Table 1* provides descriptive statistics of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (Spielberg, 1984), *Ghostbusters* (Reitman, 1984), and *Beverly Hills Cop*, the three top American films of 1984.

Table 1. Box Office Performance Comparison of Top Three 1984 Films

Domestic Title	<i>Beverly Hills Cop</i>	<i>Ghostbusters</i>	<i>Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom</i>
Domestic Release Date	Dec 5, 1984	Jun 8, 1984	May 23, 1984
Production Budget	\$15,000,000	\$30,000,000	\$28,000,000
Opening Weekend Theaters	1,532	1,339	1,687

Maximum Theaters	2,006	1,506	1,687
Theatrical Engagements²⁰	40,655	35,601	22,126
Domestic Opening Weekend	\$15,214,805	\$13,612,564	\$25,337,110
Domestic Box Office	\$234,760,478	\$242,212,467	\$179,880,271
Inflation Adjusted Domestic Box Office	\$608,025,162	\$613,053,520	\$480,216,072
International Box Office	\$81,539,522	\$53,000,000	\$153,200,000
Worldwide Box Office	\$316,300,000	\$295,212,467	\$333,080,271

Sources: *Box Office Mojo*, and *IMDb Pro*

3.4.4 The Business of the Murphy Moment

While Murphy's trickster brand of narrative subversion can be tracked and understood through public reception of his 1984 work on *SNL*, and in *48 Hours*, and *Coming to America*, it is best seen and most clearly observed through the lens of *Beverly Hills Cop*. By analyzing the money and audience popularity surrounding each of these projects, the popularity of Murphy's humor, and the value of the narrative subversion at the heart of his performances can be situated. The money sources surrounding each of the projects includes: tech investments in Murphy and films (especially music), Murphy's income from each project – demonstrating his value, project distribution and Box office returns, reviews for both films and Murphy. Murphy's star ranking in 1980, 1982, 1984, and 1989 – all occur in pivotal years for the Murphy Moment, because they establish him as a star, whose particular style is built on the use of subversive narrative and the critique of race, class, and culture. This stardom and use of narrative subversion have established a devoted fan-base dedicated to Murphy's effect on film comedy. This information is found in *Table.2*.

²⁰ For this study, theatrical engagements are understood to be the scheduled contracted dates of exhibition (screening) for a film, in a given theater.

Additionally, each of the films, in their respective year, should indicate feature film rating and status, suggesting who's watching it, when, and where, and how. The sizes of the audiences, with respect to U.S. population will respond to questions of Murphy's use of subversive narrative to cross racial lines and reshape audience appreciation of the use and critique of narrative subversion. The assignment of an MPAA R-rating to all of Murphy's film work during the Murphy Moment secures audience space for a specific range of entertainment, and affects their commercial distribution, while also opening a space for subversive narrative because of the options for explicit language and the freedom of often gendered and sexualized social comment and critique. The R-rating, used until 1996, required a parent or adult guardian to accompany anyone under the age of 17, and became indicative of a certain kind of audience and income – over the age of 17 years, with disposable income (most probably wages) – who wanted and expected nothing less than the R-rated entertainment. This information is also supported by *Table 2*.

Table 2. The Business of the Murphy Moment

Project	SNL (1980)	48 Hours (1982)	Beverly Hills Cop (1984)	Coming to America (1988)
Studio	NBC	Paramount	Paramount	Paramount
Salary	\$4,500 / episode	\$450,000	\$14,000,000	\$8,000,000 and 15% of film rental revenue
Producer	Lorne Michaels	Lawrence Gordon and Joel Silver	Eddie Murphy Productions	Eddie Murphy Productions
MPAA Rating	N/A	R	R	R
Billing (Casting)	Cast member	After Nick Nolte (#2)	Star	Star
Budget	\$350,000 / episode	\$12,000,000	\$14,000,000	\$39,000,000 (estimated)
Opening Theaters	N/A	850	1,532	2,064
Total U.S. Theaters	N/A	1,050	2,006	2,604
Opening Gross	N/A	\$4,369,868	\$15,214,805	\$21,404,420
Total U.S. Gross	N/A	\$78,868,508	\$234,760,478	\$128,152,301

Cumulative Worldwide Gross	N/A	N/A	\$81,600,000	\$160,600,000
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Sources: *Box Office Mojo* and *IMDb Pro*

3.4.3 Text Mining Results

While *Beverly Hills Cop* is not the most expensive film of 1984, it did yield the second highest total domestic revenue, \$234,760,478 (USD) of the year. This is important in light of the film's December release date, indicating that the film achieved this milestone in less than thirty days, as opposed to the six-month run achievements of *Ghostbusters* and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (see Table 1). The average rating of the film was 7.3 on an IMDb Pro scale, with scores ranging from 0 to 10,²¹ indicating a positive public reception and appreciation of the film, its content, and Murphy in both performance and film production. Twenty-five film reviews were included in the study data. The average length of film reviews published, including those archived online, was 375 words. The average length of sampled wire service accounts (Associated Press, United Press International, and domestic bylines) was 150 words. Magazine and journal articles dedicated to *Beverly Hills Cop* also averaged between 275 and 500 words.

3.4.4 Emerging Themes

As a technical innovation, this study employed the text mining capacities of NVivo to examine the body text of all of the reviews and articles found for *Beverly Hills Cop*. Text mining allowed for deep analysis of the data. Codes for the five most actively noted themes, including those related to trickster performance and technology, were found in the sample articles and reviews. The themes were: (1) the shift in Paramount's business practices following Murphy's

²¹ Scores taken from IMDb Pro reflect responses from 75 external review sources. These critical contemporary sources have also been assessed for this study using NVivo text mining.

success in *48 Hours*, (2) Murphy's presence, prominence (as "black" and "African American"), and his success in a lead role not (originally) intended for him, (3) Familiarity and acceptance of Murphy's brash urban performance style, facile language and identity manipulation, and their link to repeatable popular viewing of his *SNL* performances (the VCR connection), (4) Murphy's critical address of race by not speaking directly to, but through it, (5) the attachment of R-ratings and adult themes to Murphy's popularity, and (6) the relationship of sexuality to narrative subversion.

While this study did not initially hypothesize the relationship of sexuality to narrative subversion, NVivo text coding indicates that note should be taken of Murphy's trickster use of a gay persona as a variable for the analysis of subversive narrative. There is also a particular note of Murphy's character, Axel Foley, lacking a love interest, and character placement of potential masculine partnerships within the film, that surfaced during the coding process, also indicating that perceptions of sexuality are related to narrative subversion. Text data also revealed that many of the twenty-five most frequently used words found in the sample are included in the hypothesis of this study. The text data also strongly indicated a need to review the scenes chosen for analysis by this study for their connection to the film's audience and R-rating, and to reflect on their relationship to Murphy's trickster modes and the narrative subversion of race, class, and culture.

4 RESULTS

The commercial success of an independent film financing model used by Paramount, in conjunction with Lawrence Gordon Productions, for *48 Hours* proved the marketability of the low budget (\$12 million) buddy cop film. The transformational model, easily considered to be a trickster effort, placed Paramount Studios into partnership with Gordon for distribution and

exhibition of his film. This model challenged the traditional order of studio product generation and management, allowing Paramount executives to destabilize media borders and raise studio profits. In this successful transformation of business paradigms through trickster practices, the success of *48 Hours* and its sequel, *Another 48 Hours* (Walter Hill, 1990), offered proof of the independent financing and distribution model that created Eddie Murphy Productions.

The Murphy production company was part of a 1984 Paramount contract revision that secured a five-feature motion picture and one concert movie production deal for Murphy (AP.1987, August 27). In the trickster tradition, this contractual addendum works to create new sociality through the newly fused boundaries between actor, producer, and exhibitor. The business trickster performance here, is both the destroyer of the existing Hollywood studio community order, and the creator of a new indie order. Murphy, as an independent actor, emerges as the new trickster, able to produce narrative outside of the major film studio system, while opening the feature film market to a new sub-genre of the cop film, and a racial genre twist of leading man, at a time when few non-white actors occupied similar filmic space. Murphy took hold of and occupied this filmic space by using a comedic application of the urban and racial appeal of Blaxploitation, filtered through piercing intelligence and openly self-aware humor to exploit the successful action genre in *Beverly Hills Cop*, the first film from Eddie Murphy Productions.

Filmed on location in Michigan and California, *Beverly Hills Cop*, under the trickster sway of Eddie Murphy Productions, does not initially read as an indie production or “anti-Hollywood.” The film does not push digital limits, preferring Dolby sound, the use of Panaflex Cameras and Lenses by Panavision, and Technicolor film. The use of Technicolor film is important, as this film stock has the ability to capture and render black skin in traditionally

relatable tones, as opposed to hardened minstrelsy – and keeping the film’s star relatable is not an “anti-Hollywood” intention, although it is implicit in the multiple natures of the trickster. Beyond the film stock, the printed film format and finished length of the film were industry standard for this time – a fusing of the boundaries between Hollywood and transition. Accompanied by the cultural links of “new” electronic music from Harold Faltermeyer and Glenn Frey, juxtaposed against the pulsing R and B driven voices of the Pointer Sisters and Patti LaBelle, as socially specific nondiegetic sound, the film demonstrates independent, but not “anti-Hollywood” trickster elements. Because of the connection between Paramount Pictures and Eddie Murphy Productions, distribution and exhibition of the film were standard for their historic time and place.

However, because *Beverly Hills Cop* is produced by Eddie Murphy Productions, an independent film company developed as an extension of Murphy’s Paramount contract, it is Murphy’s production of the film that marks *Beverly Hills Cop* as a non-standard 1980s feature film. It is also Murphy’s presence as a black lead actor, with exquisite comic timing and aptitude that sells the film, and makes the clever, intuitive, skilled, and remarkably likeable trickster Axel Foley an unexpected anti-Hollywood character. As Foley, Murphy places a subversively emblematic black face and voice on the character and shifts the film’s urban cultural narrative tone to one that can be read as distinctively black and anti-Hollywood.

Murphy’s use of narrative in the trickster tradition, including, rapid speech, urban slang, and contextualized “gangster” rhetoric subversively border on neo-noir, while also reading as anti-Hollywood. This trickster combination works to make Murphy’s character read as a Reagan era hard body (Jeffords, 1994), taking on both crime and “the man” in his stand for “the law.” As a Reagan era hard body whose fitness, purpose, and courage could have the power to redeem the

nation's individual failures of will, Axel Foley has the wherewithal to be a bona fide badass trickster, but by elevating the genre and refocusing the traditional Blaxploitation or crime genre 'score' to reflect Reagan era fears and concerns, Murphy-as-Foley further subverts the adventure/action and buddy cop genres. In destabilizing the genres, the street-smart Foley chooses to be a clever, verbal and social chameleon, a trickster dedicated to duty, honor, and intellect. Murphy-as-Foley stands in contrast to the typical Blaxploitation protagonist – he is educated, legally employed, and dedicated to his friends, while respecting their individual futures. He becomes a new and marketable Hollywood hero who happens to be black. But, even with the genre twist and racial subversion, the stereotype of the strong man standing in his own truth is used to further the Reagan era narrative agenda: by virtue of narrative and its impact on plot device, Murphy-as-Foley the trickster becomes everyman and stands for the U.S. in its fight against the menace of what Reagan termed, “the evil empire.”

With emphasis on an educated, urbanized, multi-racial audience, the narrative action and location filming of *Beverly Hills Cop* borrows heavily from the 1950s crime genre and Blaxploitation films of the 1970s as the tale of Axel Foley unfolds with an opening scene set in Detroit's shadowy inner city. This borrowing renders the film an agitating pastiche that transforms both the crime, comedy, and adventure genres and the film noir style, while honoring the classic stereotypes of urban locales, requisite police versus criminal action, the call to nostalgia through friendship, and vintage cars and clothing, while critiquing race, class, and culture in Reagan era America, and marking a specific moment of narrative subversion by a black film comedian.

As a trickster intervention, the narrative of *Beverly Hills Cop* is determinedly middlebrow, and makes no pretense of higher art, not even through its technologically advanced

soundtrack. The film's middlebrow intent is seen clearly in its low, blue-collar beginning – a slapstick chase, ending with the apprehension of the bad guys, and Foley being confronted by a superior officer, resulting in a criticism of the conflict surrounding the politics of mainstream law and order. Here, class and culture offer an inartistic comment on America through subversive narrative.

The ideology of *Beverly Hills Cop* is populist in nature and deliberate in expression as it embraces, through the subversive actions of protagonist Axel Foley, the very cold war American belief that the superior will of the common man and the national good is ever threatened by foreign evil – not unlike Reagan's assessment of the "evil empire." That this ideology is woven throughout the film narrative at this historical moment also demonstrates an unrepentant middlebrow intent, as suggested by the R-rating that allows for moments of suggestive humor and language in spaces that make highbrow pretense, as in the spaces occupied by Victor Maitland, Foley's antagonist. The independent leanings of the film's production model, target audience and cultural critique, are also lodged in middlebrow comedy, and form the generative mechanism driving the film into a new 1980s direction with Murphy at its center. The success and endurance of *Beverly Hills Cop* demonstrates this by relying on the visual humor to be found in the fish out of water situations, the clear differences in etiquette of the Detroit police and those of Beverly Hills, and Eddie Murphy's social, performance, and personal, charisma.

4.1 "Stir It Up" – Indie Aesthetic and Subversive Product Placement

Murphy uses subversive narrative as a powerful mechanism for transmitting a collective worldview, and in building a world, there is need for authenticity and access to both *mise-en-scène* and *metteur-en-scène* that provide a reliable, fact-based and believable cinematic world. Referential branding is used in the film to incorporate and support realism and subjective

commentary through pastiche and parody that engage traditional four major traits of independent film. In considering *Beverly Hills Cop* as an indie film, it should be noted that: (1) it is a low budget film featuring actors who are not A-list superstars (*this* is the film that established Murphy as a superstar), (2) because it is set in the contemporary every day, the film does not reach into the distant future, and is only concerned with that part of the past that establishes the relationships germane to the present film narrative – this is also a budget consideration, requiring fewer sets, less specialized wardrobe and props, and use of available and existing locations, (3) in giving the protagonist “heart” and an essentially personal backstory that reflects him as both outcast and American Everyman, the film becomes personal in tone, allowing for insertion of comedic style and artistic nuances into narrative spaces that might not have appeared in a more tightly constructed big budget Hollywood feature film, and (4) indie films tend to avoid the cost and time constraints of orchestral scoring, preferring to use music sourced from bands. *Beverly Hills Cop* is one of the first ten films to use techno music as a part of the film score.²²

Stretching allusive indie aesthetics that work by suggestion rather than through explicit mention, the film exaggerates the commonplace to analyze and assess 1980s American race, class, and culture. In *Beverly Hills Cop*, the themes established through *mise-en-scène* and *metteur-en-scène* are essential to the contrasts offered in narrative, visual, and audio subversion encouraged by the music that supports the cinematic themes. The music used in the film is both indie and trickster inspired, and meant to encourage audience notions of newness, trend, and the

²² As noted on IMDb Pro, in *The Music Sound* (Sfetcu, 2014), and *Techno Rebels: The Renegades of Electronic Funk* 2nd edition (Sicko, 2010), the first ten films to use techno music are: *Thief* (Mann, 1981), by Tangerine Dream; *Escape From New York* (Carpenter, 1981), by Alan Howarth; *Chariots of Fire* (Hudson, 1981), by Vangelis; *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), by Vangelis; *Scarface* (De Palma, 1983), by Giorgio Moroder; *Videodrome* (Cronenberg, 1983), by Howard Shore; *The Terminator* (1984), by Brad Fiedel; *Beverly Hills Cop* (Brest, 1984) by Harold Faltermeyer; *Ghostbusters* (Reitman, 1984), by Ray Parker, Jr.; *The Lost Boys* (Schumacher, 1987), by Gerard McMann; *Near Dark* (Bigelow, 1988), by Tangerine Dream; and (arguably) *The Secret of My Success* (Ross, 1987), by Yello.

energy of Murphy-as-Foley. Balancing the appeal of innovation garnered through the use of Detroit-born techno music with the historic Detroit R and B sound attached to the Motown legend also suggests specific political, economic, race, class, and cultural connections for Murphy-as-Foley, the circumstances of Foley in the incarnations of law enforcer, friend, and incidental black man, and the self-adjudicated mission that will take him to Beverly Hills.

By using a consumer classed mode of product and social placement that engages and juxtaposes the poverty of Detroit's inner-city, and the indulgent expanse of Beverly Hills, the film creates a realistic illusion of social texture and depth, and situates Axel Foley as a man caught between right and wrong, at the trickster-inspired crossroads of "barely enough" and "way over the top." This textured environment is further complicated by past spectator visual experience of Murphy and the caper/adventure/action film through the unexpected incorporation of products and sponsors that the audience has an established relationship with.

Product sponsors found in the scenes used for this study include the city of Detroit, MI, the use of Detroit city police cruisers, and the inclusion of Gil Hill, a real-life law enforcement officer, as Inspector Todd, Foley's Detroit boss. Foley's Detroit Lions letterman jacket, classic Adidas sneakers, and "Mumford Phys Ed. Dept." sweatshirt (from a real Detroit school), are all a part of establishing Murphy-as-Foley, and Everyman character, and situating the film's appeal to the common man. Axel Foley's service weapon is a 1970s-era Browning Hi-Power, a weapon that is no longer in production, but is available from collectors, which gives the impression that this is a special weapon that may have outlived its usefulness. Or, and this study considers this to be more likely, Foley is a man with specific beliefs attached to traditions of the law, and the law is represented by his gun. Susan Jeffords suggests that holding specific beliefs on Law and Order is an expected trait of a 1980s film hero (Jeffords, 2004; 25-26). Attendant to those beliefs, Foley

inverts Law and Order as he aligns the weapon and its placement with the trickster practice of narrative inversion.

In what might be considered as a lucky strike of editing, the film sets up Murphy-as-Foley with a load of *Lucky Strike* cigarettes in the back of a "hijacked" truck, and as the scene progresses, the camera pans across the boxes of *Lucky Strike* and *Pall Mall* cigarettes more than twenty-five times during a five-minute time period. At one point, Eddie Murphy deepens the trickster's commercial connection when he breaks a pack of cigarettes from a box, turns the label to the camera and quips, "These are very popular cigarettes with the children," a comment that is simultaneously critical and suggestive. In other nods to authenticity, according to IMDb Pro, the cigarette truck is hijacked in Dearborn, Michigan, just outside of downtown Detroit, long known as "The Motor City," and Murphy-as-Foley drives a beat up 1970 Chevy Nova – a product of Detroit's "beat up" auto production industry.

When Foley cons his way into a room at the Millennium Biltmore Hotel, physically located at 506 South Grand Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90071 (referred to as the Beverly Palm Hotel, in the film), he rants "...I was gonna call the article 'Michael Jackson Is Sitting On Top of the World,' but now I think I might as well just call it, 'Michael Jackson Can Sit On Top of the World Just As Long As He Doesn't Sit in the Beverly Palm Hotel, 'CAUSE THERE'S NO NIGGERS ALLOWED IN THERE!'" and by invoking race to critique the high-end culture and economy of Beverly Hills, Murphy also calls attention and reflection to a 1983 *Playboy* magazine article about himself (Kaplan, 1983), subversively reminding the audience, and perhaps the filmmakers and his co-stars, that he is the black star and producer (in conjunction with Paramount) of the film.

4.2 “Axel F” – Critical Response to *Beverly Hills Cop*

Much of what is seen onscreen in *Beverly Hills Cop* represents the cinematic trickster simply doing his job, while having fun with narrative, race and gender representation, and culture. Murphy’s open comedic address of the successful action genre, and its accompanying racial genre twist, could not have happened if the audience had not already expected and anticipated it – in part because of the film’s R-rating, but also because of Murphy’s having become a familiar, albeit often unpredictable, commodity through the cultural links of television, standup comedy, and previous films.

48 Hours is often considered to be the first biracial buddy-cop film (Gates, 2004: 20-29; Guerrero, 1993: 237-246), because of its intentional subversion of the caper film and its action film subgenre through race and explicit language not found in earlier forms of the genres, Murphy was consistently positioned as the cinematic trickster. Quick-witted, fast-moving and fast-talking, always slick-but-fallible, in the liminal space between screen and standup, Murphy maintained his piercing and open address of a new kind of educated, tech savvy, socially aware media consumer, often with his very presence pointing to the ongoing lack of diversity within the film industry.

This charismatic cultural connection is visible in *Beverly Hills Cop*, where it works to exploit the U.S. middle and upper class engagement with race, television, sound, and film exhibition by allowing Murphy to ultimately generate a middlebrow class link through the ideological push of populist comedy, against a traditional classic Hollywood narrative that dictated a different story; one told without the use of a minority actor in the leading role of an action film (Gates, 2004: 20-29). Using Murphy as a catalyst, *Beverly Hills Cop* demonstrates a twist of a tried and true classical Hollywood genre – the caper film – working to transform itself,

during the Reagan era, into a new model of Hollywood financing and production, with a profit-based goal.

Critical review of the film is positive, with more than 85% of the contemporary 1984-1985 reviews collected by this study giving the film reviews of five out of five stars. To further situate the favor that the film and its star found with the viewing public, it should be noted that IMDb Pro data suggests that the film was not only well received in the 1980s, but that it has stood a veritable “test of time,” as reviews continues to rate the film at a range of 7.3 out of 10-points.²³ Highly noted among the film’s positive contemporaneous reviews were comments similar to those of Janet Maslin, of the *New York Times*. Stating “*Beverly Hills Cop* finds Eddie Murphy doing what he does best: playing the shrewdest, hippest, fastest-talking underdog in a rich man's world,” she gave the film a score of 80 out of 100 points (Maslin, 1984). David Sterrit of the *Christian Science Monitor* considered “*Beverly Hills Cop* is an action movie and an Eddie Murphy vehicle first, but Brest's dramatic intelligence surfaces often enough to make a welcome difference in what could have been an ordinary crowd-pleaser” (Sterrit, 1984). He scored the film as worthy of 83 out of 100 points. Critic Richard Schickel of *Time* magazine found that “Murphy exudes the kind of cheeky, cocky charm that has been missing from the screen since Cagney was a pup, snarling his way out of the ghetto. But as befits a manchild of the soft-spoken '80s, there is an insinuating sweetness about the heart that is always visible on the sleeve of Murphy's habitual sweatshirt” (Schickel, 1984). This review grades the film as an 80 out of 100 points.

²³ IMDb Pro has computed a rating of 7.3 on a scale of 10-points based on 147,963 reviews, as of April, 2019 (https://pro.imdb.com/title/tt0086960/?ref=instant_tt_1&q=Beverly%20Hills%20Cop).

While these reviewers found the film to be entertaining, not all reviews were positive, including one written by David Ansen of *Newsweek*, who felt strongly enough to write that “*Beverly Hills Cop* is no masterpiece, but it uses Murphy to maximum effect. At its best, the movie is exactly as brazen, charming and mercurial as Murphy himself, which is to say it is unimaginable without him” (Ansen, 1984). Suggesting that it is Murphy-as-Foley at the heart of the film and driving the narrative with the talent and strength of the skills learned in the subversive grounding of Murphy’s standup comedy and *SNL* work, Ansen gave the film 70 out of 100 points.

Roger Ebert of the *Chicago-Sun* noted that “Eddie Murphy looks like the latest victim of the Star Magic Syndrome, in which it is assumed that a movie will be a hit simply because it stars an enormously talented person. Thus, it is not necessary to give much thought to what he does or says, or to the story he finds himself occupying” (Ebert, 1985). And as he gave the film a grade of 63 out of 100 points, the closing of his review concluded that “Murphy is one of the smartest and quickest young comic actors in the movies. But he is not an action hero, despite his success in *48 Hrs*” (Ebert, 1985). In noting that Murphy is an “enormously talented person,” Ebert, like Ansen suggests that it is Murphy’s use of subversive narrative that powers *Beverly Hills Cop*.

The lowest contemporaneous score located for this study was penned by Pauline Kael of *The New Yorker*, who wrote “[t]he whole picture is edited and scored as if it were a lollapalooza of laughs. And, with Murphy busting his sides guffawing in self-congratulation, and the camera jammed into his tonsils, damned if the audience doesn't whoop and carry on as if yes, this is a wow of a comedy” (Kael, 1984). She gave the film a score of 30 out of 100 points, without identifying specific points (aside from her dislike of Murphy’s performance) for the low score.

Reflecting on Kael's low score as much as upon the higher scores from Maslin, *et al*, it is important to note that when the *Beverly Hills Cop* reviews are used as a contemporaneous gauge of public acceptance, they suggest that Murphy, in his third feature film, is a curiosity. In addressing his "brazen charm and mercurial talent," the reviews also voice a notice and appreciation for Murphy's trickster attributes as the "thing" that makes him a star. While the film was subjectively viewed by each reviewer, an acceptance of Murphy's crossover appeal (between standup, television, and film) and trickster styling is apparent. An appreciation of the talent Murphy displayed in his earlier work is also apparent through the expectations of his work in *Beverly Hills Cop*, especially in the reviews included in this study. In the indication of public notice and acceptance, the film's R-rating is not mentioned in any of the reviews, suggesting that a significant part of the Murphy-as-Foley appeal lies in the narrative subversion of standup comedy and Murphy's performance.

4.3 "Doing the Neutron Dance" – Narrative subversion in *Beverly Hills Cop*

Beverly Hills Cop demonstrates the traits noted by Michael Z. Newman in "Indie: an American Film Culture," as representative of independent filmmaking, especially in that "indie does not simply refer to a genre of filmmaking, but rather is an encompassing term for the culture of the independent film" (Newman, 2014: 21). In determining this indie culture, Newman points out three specific markers of distinction between indie and Hollywood films, "characters as emblems, form is a game, and when in doubt, read as anti-Hollywood" (Newman, 2014: 29).

Applying Newman's markers to *Beverly Hills Cop*, Murphy's character (Axel Foley) is unique and exaggerated in his dedication, as is required by Newman's definition. Within the context of the film, Foley functions as an emblem of the earnest and hardworking American worker, and as an emblem of both law and order, and a deontological dedication to friendship.

Murphy-as-Foley presents himself as a Detroit-bred Everyman and functions as an emblematic black critical voice in a feature film.

In looking at “form as a game,” Newman holds that

...the viewer is an active member during the time that they are watching the film ... required to stay mentally active in order to dissect and understand the film. The way independent films achieve this active engagement is often through techniques of disjunctive narrative ... genre-play which includes the combining of different genres to create a unique style ... and also by using pastiche ... as a way to allow audience members to call on their knowledge ... (Newman, 2014: 35).

The narrative of *Beverly Hills Cop* participates actively in using form as a game. Using pastiche as an often-unsubtle way of leveraging the audience between Hollywood film and television references, the film narrative builds around Murphy-as-Foley in the liminal space between Detroit Foley and Hollywood Foley. To do so, the film uses a trick of narrative significance based in Murphy’s alterity. The trick engages Murphy’s ability to slip seamlessly through shifting kinds and shades of urbanity and across genre transformations. In altering his social identity, the film narrative points out and critiques expectations of his character’s interactions and intentions, the differences and expectations of politics and political machinations through pastiche of 1980s action films. Newman suggests that “pastiche only works when the audience recognizes that the form being copied is a copy, that it has formal similarity without being identical” (Newman, 2014: 179). In making use of Murphy’s urbanity and its cosseted place in television, on the comedic stage, in film, and in music, the film becomes a pastiche of

popular action films – including those of Sylvester Stallone, who was the original actor chosen for the role of Axel Foley (Taylor, 2019: 41).

Beverly Hills Cop offers acerbic comments on the existing American economy, employment, social status as a caste system, the power of racial bonding, and the international threats of “bad guys” with arguably soviet-sounding accents. In considering subversive narrative, this study finds that when the African American lived experience of film narrative is fundamentally linked to processes of self-identification and collective memory through language-as-identity, no gap exists between film plot and subversive narrative. This study also notes that the absence of an experiential gap points to a reciprocal process in which the disrupted storyline of *Beverly Hills Cop* enables its function as a destabilizing trickster manipulation of film narrative.

As a filmic pastiche, *Beverly Hills Cop* is composed of a subverted, but classic Hollywood influenced, blend of buddy comedy, fish out of water comedy, and straight cop action. The strong television influence of Nick Nolte, whose television work included the Emmy and Golden Globe nominated miniseries, *Rich Man, Poor Man* (Bixby, Greene, & Sagal, 1976), combined with Murphy's industry presence and his embrace of genre transformation, made *48 Hours* a film classic, emblematic of social changes in 1980s American film. Building on the success of *48 Hours*, *Beverly Hills Cop* advances the genre by building on Murphy's presence.

Viewed as a comedy, largely because of Murphy's presence, the film borrows heavily from classical Hollywood films like *The Defiant Ones* (Kramer, 1958), where two racially disparate escaped convicts, chained together, must learn to get along in order to avoid capture, and *Silver Streak* (Hiller, 1976), where potential murder is found on a train, but thwarted by perfectly mismatched buddies, with their reflections on and repurposing of race in America. And

though there are distinct differences between Murphy's Axel Foley, and Gene Hackman's Popeye Doyle, *Beverly Hills Cop* uses similar character intensity, narrative focus, and musical links, as *The French Connection* (Friedkin, 1971), while stepping forward with an ideological advance of the law and order agenda of the Reagan administration. Another significant difference between these classic films and *Beverly Hills Cop*, is that unlike most Blaxploitation genre films and earlier cop genre films (with the notable exception of *48 Hours*), *Beverly Hills Cop* was cast and filmed for a different target audience. The target audience for this film was largely composed of Yuppie and Buppie, college educated, socially aware, employed people with disposable incomes: the same people who were watching Murphy on *SNL*, and appreciating his standup routine, both onstage and in the HBO feature, *Delirious* (Gowers, 1983).

Beverly Hills Cop has been chosen for this analysis because it is produced in the near-middle of the Murphy Moment, by Eddie Murphy Productions, and also stars Murphy. The film engages trickster practices of language manipulation, situational and genre disruption, as it creates a counter-discourse that confronts race, class, and culture. The chosen scenes look for border crossing narrative subversion through: (1) performance, (2) technology – including music, and (3) Murphy as Jeffords' 80s hero (complete with stunts, gunfire, and combat with Victor Maitland, a “foreign” enemy who would steal from America),²⁴ mise-en-scène and critique of

²⁴ Jeffords considers the 1980s hero to have a distinct “hard-bodied” physical appearance (consistent with dominant masculine hegemony – Jeffords does not examine the feminine alternative, at this time) and presentation of self, especially in the action/adventure genre. For Jeffords, the hero learns his quest when he is conservatively attired (usually in neat and clean, matching clothing) and becomes progressively grittier and dirtier as he tackles the issues and the “foreigners” who threaten domestic tranquility. At some point, during the height of the action, the hero will lose some of his clothing, at the same time he loses his innocence and inhibitions around what it will take to defeat his enemy and restore life as he instinctively knows it must be lived (Jeffords, 2004: 24-63).

culture and class, through the lens of the black fantastic,²⁵ and (4) trickster interventions of narrative and form.

4.4 “New Attitude” – Critical Characterization



Figure 1. City of Detroit establishing shot

For the purposes of narrative focus, the city of Detroit (Figure 1) is a relatively flat, but still dynamic character, working in the film’s background to situate the character and trickster intentions of Axel Foley, the film’s protagonist. This study regards the city’s dynamism as feminine, because while Detroit “stands as a projection of male [film and political] fantasies... as a ‘bearer not maker of meaning’” which Laura Mulvey theorizes is the role of the female in film

²⁵ The black fantastic is the subversive force that works through hegemonic considerations of black people as fanciful, extraordinary, extravagant, and grotesque beings, capable of generating minor-key performance sensibilities that provide a basis for a substantive post-colonial imaginary and politics. Richard Iton coined the term to suggest that ‘the black fantastic’ be used “to identify how we might situate popular culture in general, and black popular culture in particular, in relation to both the formally and informally political [and] to consider the implications of reading culture as politics in the context of the post-civil rights era” (Iton, 2010:4).

(Mulvey, 1989: 15), a role that the city uses as a rebellious act of trickster focus. Operating through an oppositional gaze, which theorist bell hooks considers to be an act of political rebellion and resistance (hooks, 2001: 123-137), Detroit not only refuses to blink at the camera, but uses the camera to make political critique of itself. Employing a socially defined pattern of femininity, the city's visual conversation displays empathy, sensitivity, tolerance, and compassion in the images shared with the audience through the use of multiple takes, evenly blended match cuts, and subtle wipes.

As an organized entity charged with conducting the life of its citizens, the city reveals itself through editing, *mise-en-scène*, Glenn Frey's music, and the obvious regulations needed to maintain law and order, seen in street and neighborhood traffic. In fulfilling its community duties, the city is also quick to remind the viewer of its level of responsibility and how those responsibilities are delegated. As an urban space dedicated to accommodating more than one million people, according to the 1984 U.S. census, the city fills in many of the historical time and relationship gaps in the narrative around Foley by explaining his character, intelligence, employment, and friends, depending on the needs of the story.

As an American city, during the Reagan years, Detroit also suffered massive population shifts, resulting in tremendous racial disparity, and the film's opening uses medium shots of children and adults, going about their day in the inner city to illustrate this. These medium shots do include both black and white people, but in significantly differing numbers, a reflection of Detroit's dwindling population, which according to 1980 census reports, indicated that the city's white population had shifted from 55 percent to 34 percent, within in a decade. Economists and urban affairs specialists have argued that the decline was sparked by discriminatory urban policies and federal court decisions which decided against NAACP lawsuits and refused to

challenge the legitimacy of housing and school segregation. In the use of the panning camera, Detroit works to reveal and discuss her point of view (POV) on race and class through images of its residents operating in the midst of isolated and deteriorating houses and businesses, and large blocks of abandoned inner-city land. When Detroit's POV reaches an aesthetic conclusion, it is that the departure of a middle-class left the city suffering from an inadequate tax base, too few jobs, swollen welfare rolls, and underfunded school and healthcare systems. Detroit submits herself as a major American city plagued by unemployment, crime, overwhelming poverty per capita, and infant mortality, under the critical gaze of the camera. As the city introduces itself, the black screen opens for a first look at working class and lower class Detroit, in an establishing shot, to the tune of "The Heat Is On," followed by the film title, and the brilliantly red-colored word "Cop" stabbed into the frame.

A review of the song lyrics of "The Heat Is On," without the refrain, appears to be a caution, played as the camera allows the city to engage the audience through a wide establishing shot that shows its subject spread across the full frame. Swathed in smoky white fog, or factory smoke, the frame is crowded with smokestacks, bridges, and heavy machinery, surrounding a body of water (Figure 1). With an abundance of daylight struck shadows crossing the visible heavy machinery and factory, even extending into the water fronting the scene, there is a feeling of movement and distance, but without progress. The dense confinement of the outdoor space is nearly claustrophobic, until the scene cuts to the inside of an auto factory.

As an intensely personal aside, using the voices of the Pointer Sisters, the words of Glen Frey and the techno music born in Detroit, the city offers the element of lyrical trickster foreshadowing with the caveat that

The heat is on, on the street

Inside your head, on every beat
 And the beat's so loud, deep inside
 The pressure's high, just to stay alive/
 'Cause the heat is on...
 Caught up in the action I've been looking out for you...
 It's on the street, the heat is on...
 The shadows high on the darker side
 Behind the doors, it's a wilder ride
 You can make a break, you can win or lose
 That's a chance you take, when the heat's on you
 When the heat is on...
 Caught up in the action I've been looking out for you...²⁶

Expressed as non-diegetic sound, heard only by the audience, the theme song warns of danger and the need for wariness to come. Inside the auto factory, again a closed and crowded space, the camera moves into close-up to show shiny new cars still under construction, as the close-up shots of workers are cut out of the frame in a trickster visual mention of the unemployment that plagues the car industry and the city. Moving away from the factory, the city provides a second, self-aware establishing shot of a city intersection boasting a large, bright yellow “Welcome to Detroit” sign, before cutting and moving the spectator toward the inner city. Treating the inner city with a series of medium shots that read as fond pov shots, the city shows itself to be composed of tightly grouped humanity, aging housing stock, limited public

²⁶ The Heat Is On Lyrics. (1984). *Lyrics.com*. Retrieved April 9, 2019, from <https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/27008523/Glenn+Frey>.

transportation, and unemployment, as suggested by groups of adults congregating in full daylight.

In the film's opening scene, Detroit actively works to support the film's subversive narrative by translating the problems of its people visually, so that language is not a complicating betrayer of intention, as the film teaches the viewer how to watch it. As an immediate response to the prominence of the city, its personality, centrality to Axel Foley's life, and the implied closeness of its people, the following scenes were chosen for their specific contributions to narrative subversion through Murphy's specific use of the trickster's ability and tendency to bend gender, language, performance, class, and culture to his purpose, while narratively disrupting the world around him in order to effect change.

4.4.1 Meet Axel Foley



Figure 2. Axel Foley and the Cigarette Scam

The action of *Beverly Hills Cop* literally opens with Eddie Murphy working in the cut, fully in command of his trickster practice, and using indie form to produce pastiche from parody. From its watchful space above the action, Detroit allows the scene to open with canted aerial shots of a tractor-trailer truck stopped, more than conveniently parked, in a narrow alley – a cut. As credits continue to roll, people can be seen moving near the truck, and the camera closes the distance to show a man walking to the rear of the truck, and then climb into it, and for the first time, we see Axel Foley (Figure 2) in a provocative medium shot, listening in on a conversation that does not include him in the business at hand – a cigarette scam. Foley, whose name the audience does not yet know, is provocative in this shot because of the opposition between the languid, sensually open arrangement of his body, countered by the intelligent watchfulness of his eyes.

Well aware of the camera's position and its gaze, when Murphy-as-Foley rises from his place among the boxed cigarettes, it is apparent by his changed posture and speed of movement, that his place in the scam is not respected, and that he is considered to be “the help.” He resists this notion by glibly inserting himself into the conversation, where the trickster combination of a two-shot and Murphy's instinctive timing shifts the narrative to include Murphy-as-Foley in the deal as an adult man (not a kid or a child) capable of negotiating for a truckload of cigarettes that are “very popular with the children.” The trickster practice of situation inversion found in this moment marks Foley as a man of duality, and a man to watch: a man who deals with the illegality of theft while chatting about tax and fraud and the fragility of children, and a man fully aware of his race and how he appears to others outside of his community.

Clearly prepared to make a deal for the truckload of cigarettes that the audience and camera have already assessed as being worth the risk of capture, Foley finds that his buyer is

attempting to cheat him by undercutting his price and adds insult to injurious disrespect by calling him “kid.” Murphy-as-Foley changes character, prepared to duly “chastise” the buyer, but is interrupted by the local police, only noticing the approaching marked car, when the siren sounds. Caught in the act, Murphy and the buyer are framed in a medium two-shot. As a note of narrative subversion, the black man (Foley) automatically looks guilty: he’s holding the money and stays in place, while the white guy grabs the money at the first opportunity and jumps off the truck... and the police watch the black guy.

Still on the truck, Foley is questioned, while his white buyer stands on the ground, next to a police officer, physically aligned with “the law” but still looking suspicious. When asked for identification, the buyer runs. Chased by police, the scene rapidly disintegrates into a mad chase when the truck driver shifts into gear and a chaotic chase rolls through the streets of Detroit. The music for the chase is the now-classic “Neutron Dance,”²⁷ whose lyrics introduce the notion of “I don’t want to take it anymore...” and Murphy-as-Foley hangs on for his life as the truck rampages through domestic and commercial spaces of a city on the edge of economic and physical ruin. The song and lack of control offer prescient knowledge of the liminal space occupied by Foley. He is a black man, hanging on for dear life, and buffeted by circumstances beyond his control, in Detroit. As the truck careens through the streets, spilling cigarettes, endangering people in cars, trucks, and busses, five police cars take up the chase – treating an urban area, once one of the largest cities in the country, with blatant disregard for public safety – ultimately blocking the street and drawing their weapons. When the white truck driver runs away, eight officers sprint behind him, and the camera allows a wide shot of the folly. On the

²⁷**Neutron Dance Lyrics.** (1984). *Lyrics.com*. Retrieved April 10, 2019, from <https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/1880062/The+Pointer+Sisters>.

wrecked truck, alone in a wide shot, Murphy rises from the wreckage and is confronted by weapons before he is recognized with the words, “Foley, we should have known it was you.”

Standing in the open back of the damaged vehicle, Foley is presented as effortlessly charismatic and likeable; a psychopathic individual in a town where his peers are in thrall to an oppressive collective that does not speak to what he is. And in this moment, there are no other words to describe the developments around a character whose name describes the anthropomorphic incarnation of the trickster as a manipulator of motion and circumstances. In the form a black man capable of manipulating language around the recorded effects of a film, Murphy engages notions of Foley (sound) mechanics. In a further trickster play on form, the first name (Axel) of Murphy’s character is a homonym for ‘axle,’ the term describing the rod or spindle passed through a series of wheels that allows for the movement and rotation of other power-driven elements – in much the same way as Murphy’s navigation of New Hollywood allowed the elements of *Beverly Hills Cop* to challenge and subvert the narrative of the film. Standing as the deceiver who would imitate a criminal enterprise, with the aim of breaking it, to uphold the law, protagonist Foley becomes an emblem of trickster parody and pastiche.

4.4.2 *Axel's gay pretext to reach Victor Maitland*



Figure 3. Beverly Hills meets “Ramon”

The third scene inspected by this writing occurs in the city of Beverly Hills, at an elegant “white tablecloth” restaurant. Foley needs to reach the film’s antagonist, Victor Maitland, at his dining club, but anticipates being refused entry based upon his otherness, a condition lodged in reductive differences of race, class, bodily presentation (which includes his sweatshirt, jeans and Nike shoes), and non-membership. At the restaurant entrance, realizing that he will be denied the privilege of entry, Murphy-as-Foley challenges the denial and the straight hegemonic male gaze of the restaurant’s icy maître d’. To subvert the denial and indifference to his presence, Murphy accesses the trickster’s shape-shifting talent and literally slips into a gay persona, right in front of the audience’s eyes (Figure 3). The audience has seen this trick before. It is a well-known part of Murphy’s standup routines and television work, and highly discussed by the star’s fans. And there are many people attending the R-rated film, waiting and watching, just to see it happen

again, but with the fascination of the theater of attractions, the sublimation of the other becomes a critical feature of social resistance through gender, sexuality, race, and culture transformation.

The music for this scene is “Axel F,”²⁸ working as a non-diegetic clue, in the trickster tradition, alerting the audience to keep a sharp eye on the tricky cop. Once Murphy-as-Foley makes the shift in persona, with the intent of challenging the politics of respectability, the camera uses an over-the-shoulder shot to observe Murphy’s performance. This self-aware move is indicative of the “watchability” of the othered black gay man, and the social narrative that uses him to access a raced and classed space. It is also indicative of the notion that such a ploy will actually work in the white male dominated, classed space of the film. The over-the-shoulder-shot also works to give the audience the advantage of being in on the trickster’s joke of “flipping the script,” encouraging an emotional and raced connection to Murphy, Foley, and subverted narrative.

Standing in the trickster mode of bricolage, using language-as-identity, and introducing himself as “Ramon,” Murphy-as-Foley bends the experience of the standup comedy stage to filter the trickster’s use of subversive narrative through hegemonic etiquette. When Foley uses mannered, identity-assumed, stereotypical conventions to suggest that Maitland needs to know that a recent visit to “the clinic” has resulted in a diagnosis of “Herpes Simplex-10” for “Ramon,” and that Maitland should check with his own physician before “things start falling off of the man,” immediate conclusions based in race, class, language-as-identity, and sociality are drawn. Nonplussed and embarrassed by the revelation and its intimations, the maître d’ suggests

²⁸ Faltermeyer, H. (1984, December 5). Axel F. On *Beverly Hills Cop* [Vinyl record]. MCA Records.

that Foley should deliver the message himself, thereby securing the desired entry to the restaurant for the adept trickster.

The scene is undeniably lodged in Murphy's trickster work within the cut. Here, the film assumes audience understanding and acceptance of the complications of race, masculinity, inferred sexuality and hegemony, through the subversive spaces created by its R-rating and Murphy's popularity. In the fundamental space of trickster complication formed by bricoleur and imitation, this scene also questions the efficacy of being automatically assumed to be othered or a flamboyant part of the black fantastic because of black skin and a simpering lisp. The effectiveness of the impression becomes more troubling when the flamboyance of a black character like "Ramon" appears in the midst of the AIDS epidemic, with the suggestion of an oddly named "real life" disease. While this scene does a unique and incisive job of undermining narrative through trickster practice when the ease of indifference subverts what was "allegedly" done in the dark, it also conjures thoughts around Murphy's assault on homosexuality in his concert film, *Delirious*.

An HBO special, occurring within the Murphy Moment, *Delirious* is noteworthy because of its inclusion of the derisive description of homosexual men as "faggots," and Murphy's declaration that he is "scared of them" (Gower, 1983). In a closer look at *Delirious*, E. Patrick Johnson holds that the narrative subversion found in this *Beverly Hills Cop* scene works both historically and reflexively because "his [Murphy's] audiences were primed not only for the limp wristed sissies... but also the irresponsible miseducation about how AIDS is contracted and the general homophobia of his standup routines [from *SNL*]" (Johnson, 2003: 221). This study does find a space to concur with Johnson's contention because it raises questions of Murphy's narrative purpose in relying on the trick of gender identity subversion as an indicator of

perceived sexual orientation, and in turn, using it as a mimetic emblem of black gay men to construct an othered parody of masculinity. This is a contradiction of identity and race, in which no borders are sacred, and Murphy-as-Foley is potentially toxic in response to a situation he deliberately inverts as he forces his imitation of “Ramon” through a transgressive interstitial space. In this space, there is no authenticity, by design. There is no recounting or appreciating the burdens, triumphs, or pitfalls of homosexuality – a disservice to the minimal 1980s black queer onscreen presence.

With his only function being to serve as black and queer in a white-centered story, “Ramon” is pulled directly from a white homosexual gaze, and is constructed from the sassy gay tropes that compose a straight man’s nightmare. He is a one dimensional character created from stereotypes. Without complexity, nuance, or other acculturation, “Ramon” serves the function of a gendered placeholder who is never intended to address identity or oppression. This expendable character is Murphy, in the cut, as the trickster, without regard for social cost – and in trickster tradition, he has chosen to work through absurdity and ambiguity to achieve his narrative purpose, again, without regard for the impressions he leaves behind. This disregard is seen in the immediate way Murphy-as-Foley discards “Ramon” and the gay black male persona, as soon as he has achieved his narrative purpose of moving the story forward.

Murphy’s presentation of the term “faggot” in his standup performance was based in shaming language and physical elements, leading to suggestions that gay black men stand outside the sexual boundaries of “authentic” black masculinity, but clearly, this was not the way Murphy-as-Foley applied the term in his undercover application. As a reminder: Axel Foley is *not a Beverly Hills Cop*, and in spite of his application of the gay black man trope, neither is he publicly homosexual in this performance of othered masculinity, although the dedication to his

murdered male “friend” and the lack of an onscreen love interest does open a space for other questions suggested by the trickster’s ability to shift the unformed individual through class divisions, and reorder gender and sexuality.

Trey Ellis of Black Film Review considers that only Murphy could have deliberately displaced sexuality within the liminal space of the film narrative, he also suggests that “[t]he homosexual references and characters in *Beverly Hills Cop* are so pervasive and bizarrely incongruous that many of them must have been inserted knowingly” (Ellis, 1987). There is a suggestion that the film’s trickster practice of situation inversion, gender and shape-shifting, and the crossing of sexual barriers is deliberate subversion of the film’s narrative – though he never suggests whether “Ramon” is a factor of Murphy’s invention, or a screenwriter’s imagination. Ellis further suggests that the subversive intent of the film and its director (Martin Brest) is to disrupt the impact of Murphy and his character (Foley), in a distinctly trickster move. The work of this study disagrees that the film may have been designed to press Murphy and his comedic voice into a smaller black film space. Instead, contemporaneous data suggests that it should be understood that Paramount was also a stakeholder in this film and stood to profit heavily from Murphy’s presence. So, while there is room to view “Ramon” as a trickster’s marketing ploy that sees Murphy’s talent as inviolate, there is also space to understand that as the trickster, enjoying an intense desire for self-expression and stardom, Murphy also saw himself above reproach, to the exclusion of black gay males.

In placing Detroit (in the person of police detective Axel Foley) into direct comparison and conversation with the class and culture of Beverly Hills (demonstrated here, in the person and position of the maître d’ and the restaurant he protects), the two cities are shown to be nearly polar opposites in race, class, and culture. Appearing virtually side-by-side in the film, it is the

trickster's ploy of not speaking directly to poverty, excess, gender, sexuality, race, or privilege that makes the critique and differences most obvious in the conversation between the two cities. Through the use of subversive narrative, Murphy-as-Foley, as a "fish out of water," is able to make the conversational differences a believable part of the film, and a pointed social critique. Through difference in sociality and culture, this scene offers an inverted, but direct comment on race, class, and culture when viewed against its "blurred" mirror images of the cop undercover, and the black man "on the down-low."

5 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Summary

The work of this study points to the existence of a specific Eddie Murphy Moment in 1980s film. This Moment is useful in grounding the work of the black standup comedian in American comedic film, demonstrated through the destabilizing of New Hollywood film narrative via introduction and application of trickster conventions, and business practices. The film presence of Eddie Murphy in *Beverly Hills Cop* has been found to be an important source of the effect of subversive narrative found in film reviews and audience demand. This study hypothesized that the effects of Eddie Murphy's production and performance in *Beverly Hills Cop* under the influence of: (1) the nature of standup comedy, (2) Murphy's trickster persona, and (3) the business and technological trickster interventions of 1980s Hollywood business practices would subvert narrative in American film comedy. As hypothesized, data mining of 1984-1985 film reviews and articles show that with respect to American film comedies of the same period, *Beverly Hills Cop*, its star, production, and the resultant four film franchise, work in concert as cultural and narrative influencers. In particular, as further conjectured, Murphy's presence and performance style seem to be important variables that influence the early and

continued box office revenue of *Beverly Hills Cop*. Combining trickster aspects of Hollywood business practices, independent film interventions, a banked reliability of performance from its star and producer, with a relatively high marketing budget and studio supported distribution, “selling” the film to the public was not difficult for either Paramount or Murphy.

5.2 Implications and Limitations

Narrative subversion plays a significant role in shifting the way that race, class, and culture have impacted American film comedy. The implication of this study for African American studies is that it marks a specific 1980-1989 moment of radical shift in comedic film narrative and the influence of Eddie Murphy as a culture producer. This study further implies that the influence of the subversive agency of the black film comedian occurs in response to the trickster performer/producer and the trickster contributions of technology and industry models. Murphy’s work and behind-the-scenes navigation of industry politics via the negotiations of Eddie Murphy productions were found to be highly impactful during the Moment. In true trickster tradition, these negotiations inserted themselves into ongoing Hollywood business practices through a process that Monica Ndounou refers to as “the paradox [also understood as the trickster performance and practice] of black box-office success... [A]s the majority of his projects began to feature fewer roles for other black actors... Murphy worked to reverse this trend [by producing] seven theatrical releases, six of which are films with predominately black casts” (Ndounou, 2014: 197), over a period of twenty years that includes *Eddie Murphy Raw* (Townsend, 1987), and *Harlem Nights* (Murphy, 1989), both films are from the Murphy Moment.

The review results found around *Beverly Hills Cop* and Murphy’s subversive trickster approach to comedy, film narrative, and Hollywood industry practice, indicate that subversive

narrative and the ties of language to identity did find a successful place in film comedy during the Eddie Murphy Moment. The successful four film franchise, a lucrative career, studio and industry independent film innovations, and a transitional space for changes in standup comedy, all generated in the Murphy Moment, may be applicable to understanding other multi-tiered cultural industry structures. This research does not look at reviewer or reporter analysis as a controller of audience opinion. Rather, reviewer analyses are used as variables reflective of the film spectators who may affect box office revenues, and revenues are considered as indicators of positive or negative response to film narrative, and related subversion. As a limitation of this study, there is no control for the effect of advertising expenditure on collected reviews and articles used for NVivo data mining. This investigation of race, class, culture and subversive narrative was limited to a single 1980s feature film. Future studies may benefit from expanding the investigation to include all of Murphy's 1980s films and *SNL* work, including *Delirious* and *Raw*, as a way of charting the development and progress of subversive narrative through race, class, and culture in the Moment.

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