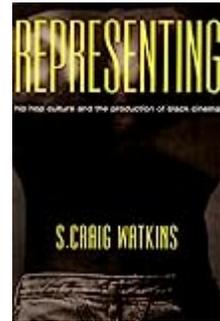


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



S. Craig Watkins. *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. xiv + 314 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-87488-3.



Reviewed by Themis Chronopoulos (Brown University)

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This book explores the relationship between black cinema, hip hop culture, and the culture industry since the mid-1980s. Through a careful account that explores the contradictions of corporate image-making, the diverse responses of African Americans to black cultural productions, and the struggle of black filmmakers for both financial resources and creative autonomy, S. Craig Watkins illuminates a multitude of important late twentieth-century social questions. He argues that while the postindustrial ghetto and its young residents have been widely associated with crime, moral decline, and welfare, at the same time black cultural productions, fashions, linguistic innovations, and lifestyles have captured the popular culture of mainstream United States.

Although Watkins engages several complex issues that govern the movie industry, cultural production, and audience reception, *Representing* is easy to follow even for readers who have no background in any of these subjects. Watkins accomplishes this by providing adequate explanations on how the Hollywood industry operates, how African American filmmakers follow or reject dominant film making paradigms, and how the boundaries of mainstream movie making have shifted in time. Two chapters on Spike Lee, the first African American filmmaker to successfully break into the Hollywood circles during the late 1980s and pave the way for the resur-

rection of commercial black filmmaking, especially stand out. There, Watkins shows how studios have provided Lee with limited budgets in spite of the commercial viability that his films have shown and the strategies that Lee has employed in order to overcome limited funding. Watkins also explores how Lee has diverged both from those African Americans who expect black cultural producers to portray their community in solely positive terms as well as from the Hollywood narrative which favors happy endings and closures.

Despite the advent and influence of Spike Lee's neo-black nationalism, during the first half of the 1990s most films directed by African Americans dealt with what Watkins calls the "ghettocentric imagination," a narrative that emphasized the postindustrial city, hip hop culture, and black youth. Films such as *Straight out of Brooklyn* (1991), *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), *Juice* (1992), and *Menace II Society* (1993) focused on the post-civil rights black ghetto as a landscape of social isolation in which young people rejected menial employment and sought upward mobility in the informal economy. The result was the refashioning of the gangster film in the 1990s as a distinctly black genre in which the illegal activities of young African Americans functioned as a critique of the American social order.

According to Watkins, in this African American film

cycle, studios enforced limited budgets, distribution, and marketing campaigns all aimed at making black movie production risk-free while still taking advantage of the appeal of hip hop culture and especially the popularity of gangsta rap to white middle class teenagers. More than this, the representations of black life that appeared in the 1990s ghetto film cycle were merchandised because they reinforced widespread but not necessarily accurate perceptions of what life in the ghetto was like and because they satisfied the appetite of mainstream America for sex and violence. Thus, the ghettocentric imagination reinforced both oppositional and dominant racial discourses and became part of the contradictions that defined African American popular culture.

Some of the effects of the 1990s ghetto film cycle were unanticipated. For example, because of the popularity of this genre, Spike Lee became increasingly marginal-

ized and, in spite of his previous success, he was forced to finance his film *Get on the Bus* (1996) independently. The ghetto film itself, along with gangsta rap, began to lose its appeal after the mid-1990s because of public opposition, censorship, and the assassinations of celebrities such as Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. Still, according to Watkins, while it lasted, the ghettocentric imagination both in film and music functioned as the most potent expressive vehicle for African American youth, while it offered African American film makers another chance in mainstream movie production.

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