LETHAL WEAPONS AND CITY GAMES

I'm an innocent bystander . . .
Send lawyers, guns and money
The shit has hit the fan.

Warren Zevon

As Grand Canyon opens, a blank screen is all that can be seen. Out of the darkness gradually comes the pulsating sound of chopper blades.1 Like so many others of my generation, I am used to connecting this sweep of mechanical wings with a particular place and history because, for more than twenty years, the sound of low-flying helicopters was used by film and television studios to signify the presence of Americans in the war zones of Southeast Asia.

Peter Markle used exactly the same cinematic effect, a blank screen and steady beat of helicopter blades, as the opening sequence of his 1988 Vietnam film, Bat 21.2 By borrowing the opening of Bat 21 for Grand Canyon in 1991, director Lawrence Kasdan brings the Vietnam war to the city of Los Angeles.1 The strategy employed by Kasdan and other Hollywood filmmakers to equate these particular killing fields with the streets of Los Angeles is complex and contradictory and will haunt this chapter. The dramatic effect, however, is startling. Although
ignorant of the subject of Grand Canyon when I started to watch it, the unmistakable sound of those blades alerted me to expect, post-Vietnam, the symbolic landscape of a black urban neighborhood.

Throughout the 1980s, Southeast Asia was presented in the popular culture of the United States as the primary site of the national nightmare: a landscape through which North American men crept under the constant surveillance of a subhuman population of menacing “gooks.” The “enemy” masqueraded as ordinary men, women, and children by day but, within the heart of the nightmare, these people were never ordinary, never innocent, and barely human. Since then, this vision has been supplanted in the popular cultural and political imagination by images of black inner-city neighborhoods.

For contemporary Hollywood filmmakers, the black neighborhoods of Los Angeles have become important sites not just for the representation of death and destruction but for the enactment of racialized social and political confrontations that to them constitute a national crisis. Indeed, these neighborhoods are now, for bankers and studios alike, as fascinating in their exoticism, their potential for violent masculine confrontations, and therefore their commercial marketability, as was Vietnam. These neighborhoods have become the sites for the current enactment of the national nightmares of the white suburban bourgeoisie—these nightmares which are inscribed upon the bodies of young, urban black males and patrolled by the “Bloods” and the “Crips.”

I am intrigued by Kasdan’s Grand Canyon because it exemplifies Hollywood’s fascination with the black inner city as the symbolic space of suburban anxiety. No matter how multicultural and multicultural our inner-city neighborhoods actually are, they are reduced in most Hollywood movies to an essentialist terrain of black and white male confrontation and resolution.

Grand Canyon conceals through its plot how, in a general way, it encourages white fear of black aggression. On the surface, the film appears merely to confirm what its target audience already understands, the material reality of the threat from young black men. But Grand Canyon also creates a utopian and somewhat magical racial relationship between two mature men, one black, one white, which acts as a possible imaginative resolution to the fears and anxieties of white suburban residents. The promotional material which accompanies the home video describes it as follows: “Grand Canyon is director Lawrence Kasdan’s powerful and uplifting film about real life and real miracles . . . and about how, after the millions of choices we make in life, one chance encounter can change it all.”

At the beginning of the film Mack, an immigration lawyer played by Kevin Kline, looks for a way to avoid the heavy traffic leaving the Los Angeles Forum after a Lakers’ game. He strays into a black neighborhood that is so alien to him that he will later categorically assure his family, “You have never been where I broke down.” What happens to Mack is evocative of the modernist journey into the “heart of darkness,” a journey originally conceived in the context of European imperialism in Joseph Conrad’s novel of that name, and recreated by Hollywood in Francis Ford Coppola’s postmodern fantasy of war in Southeast Asia, Apocalypse Now. As Mack peers anxiously out of his windshield at the unfamiliar and, to him, menacing black residential neighborhood, Warren Zevon’s music plays in his car.

Music is important to Kasdan, and the Warren Zevon soundtrack, “Lawyers, Guns, and Money,” establishes a background for his protagonist. Clearly, the repetition of the plea to “send lawyers, guns, and money” increases the tension of the moment and emphasizes the risk of imminent danger, but the song also acts to situate Mack in history. Zevon’s music is a product of the seventies, of white, yuppie, southern California culture. Mack’s familiarity with the words and apparent nostalgia for the song places him within the liberal politics and culture of this time. The music provides the character with a social location and particular history. Kasdan also uses music to signal the distance between modernist conceptions of history and subjectivity, such as those at work in Conrad’s novel, and his own postmodern vision of the fragmentation of social and political positionality. In Kasdan’s editing room the Zevon soundtrack was integrated into the film not only in order to
register with the audience the potential threat to his protagonist but to prepare them for his making music the very ground of social and political conflict.

The words of “Lawyers, Guns, and Money” evoke, with a wry liberal irony, memories of the Cold War, of danger to Americans trespassing in exotic locales, and of covert intervention in other countries. The song also establishes the liberal credentials of the character of Mack, creates a mood of empathy for his mistake (his drive is intercut with scenes from the family home, complete with beautiful wife and handsome teenage son—all this he stands to lose), and alerts the audience to the gravity of his situation. As Mack’s anxiety grows, Kasdan multiplies his visual and aural strategies for creating and maintaining anxiety, and increasing the sense of panic and foreboding in his audience.

Mack abruptly switches off his stereo in order to concentrate more effectively on finding his way home and, like a mouse in a laboratory maze, turns his car around in a futile effort to escape. As Mack drives ever closer toward the “horror” that awaits, he passes the shells of cars and the skeletons of abandoned buildings. The landscape he drives through increasingly resembles a war zone, and Mack begins to sing Zevon’s words himself as if to seek comfort in their meaning. But, as Mack mutters “send lawyers, guns, and money,” his words are overwhelmed by the taunting voice of Ice Cube, “ruthless, plenty of that and much more,” emanating from a white BMW that slow drives down and drives beside him like an animal stalking its prey. At this moment music becomes the prime vehicle for representing a cultural war which has encoded within it the political potential for a larger civil war. The rap group NWA (Niggaz with Attitude) is pitted against Zevon in a symbolic enactment of Kasdan’s narrative of race and nation which is about to unfold: a liberal white suburban male confronts a “posse” of young black urban males. The musical battle both produces and accompanies the wider class and racialized meanings of the scene, meanings which in turn both produce and confirm contemporary ideological beliefs about the “problem” of the inner city, of what is wrong with America.

The skewed perspective of this cinematic confrontation is revealed in the unequal editing of the musical “war.” In contrast to the verbal and musical fragments of NWA’s “Quiet on the Set,” the audience hears coherent narrative selections from the Zevon lyrics. We do not hear sequential sections of a verse, or even complete sentences, of the NWA lyrics; the narrative coherence of “Quiet on the Set” has been deliberately disrupted. The voice of Ice Cube fades in and out of the cat-and-mouse game as it is played out on the screen, and the words we can make out, “ruthless, plenty of that and much more,” are intended only to confirm the menacing intentions of the occupants of the BMW, five young black males who take careful note of the interloper in their territory.

Mack responds to their presence by singing:

I’m an innocent bystander . . .
Send lawyers, guns and money
The shit has hit the fan.

His car coughs, splutters, stalls, and finally stops, and Mack becomes a man under siege. He uses his car phone in a desperate attempt to get help, but isn’t sure just where he is. “I dunno . . . let’s say . . . Inglewood,” he decides, without conviction, as the car phone itself crackles and dies. Having run to a public telephone outside a convenience store, Mack continues to find it difficult, if not impossible, to describe his location exactly or, to continue the military analogy, to give his coordinates. “Buckingham, yes,” he pants, “but remember it’s about half a mile West, I guess, of there.” Mack is not only lost; he is in alien territory, and his very survival is at stake.

Kasdan carefully and deliberately recreates film narratives of Vietnam for his narrative of Los Angeles. Here again, he appears to be influenced by Markle’s Bat 21, in which Gene Hackman finds himself alone in enemy territory. In that movie Hackman plays the part of a man who shouldn’t be in the situation in which he finds himself; he is a missile intelligence expert who has had to bail out from an unarmed plane on a reconnaissance mission. His only chance of survival is at the other end
of his communications device and depends upon providing his exact coordinates. The camera work of these parallel scenes, in which Hackman and Kline run and hide from their enemies, desperate to find a safe place from which to call for help, is too similar to be coincidental, but, even more importantly, the Vietnam narrative is present in Kasdan’s decision to cast the same actor to play the part of the heroic rescuer.

Roadside assistance tells Mack that it will take forty-five minutes to get to him. He replies that he understands but warns, “if it takes that long I might be like, ah, dead.” (In the Vietnam movie, the Hackman character is also told that it is not possible to send help straight away and has a similar reaction.) Both Hackman and Kline remain under enemy surveillance. In *Grand Canyon* the NWA soundtrack changes to include fragments of “F*** the Police,” signifying the imminence of the moment of confrontation. Mack returns to his car to wait for help and the BMW pulls up behind him.

What follows is a filmic moment in which language, sound, and image coalesce to evoke intense emotions of danger and fear in the audience, reminding it of the feelings of an American soldier coming down in enemy territory. Through his personal distress Mack gives voice to the anxieties of a constituency of the white suburban middle class, whose greatest fear is being stranded in a black urban neighborhood at night. The young black men advance, framed by the rear windshield. The camera then focuses on Mack’s face. His eyes, seen in the rearview mirror, flicker as he breathes a final distress call: “Mayday, Mayday. We’re coming down.”

What Kasdan excludes from his audience in this scene is an irony that only those who know the lyrics of “Quiet on the Set” and “F*** the Police” would perceive. In fact, I would argue that Kasdan depends upon the ignorance of his target audience. For those who aren’t familiar with the album *Straight Outta Compton*, “Quiet on the Set” is about the power of performance, specifically, the potential power that a successful rap artist can gain over his audience.\(^8\) Power is, quite explicitly, the power of words over the body. For example, “ruthless, plenty of that and much more” is about controlling the movements of people, particularly women, on a dance floor, and about the power to create “a look that keeps you staring and wondering why I’m invincible.” This invincibility is entirely the result of being able to persuade with words: “when you hear my rhyme its convinceable.” Kasdan, however, disrupts the NWA’s intended narrative structure and lines like “I’m a walking threat” and “I wanna earn respect” are used to reinforce a contemporary image of the disobedient and dangerous black male who believes that respect is only gained through the possession of a gun (this is spelled out at the end of the confrontation). Perhaps the greatest irony of all is that the NWA song even predicts such misinterpretation and misuse of their words. Near the end of the rap, in a section excised from the film, an interesting dialogue occurs between Ice Cube and an unidentified voice that mimics the supposedly dispassionate, analytic tone of the sociologist or ethnographer. Ice Cube asserts that he can create “lyrics to make everybody say,” and the academic voice responds: “They can be cold and ruthless, there’s no doubt about that but, sometimes, it’s more complicated.” Ice Cube concludes: “You think I’m committing a crime, instead of making a rhyme.”

A tow-truck driver comes to Mack’s rescue at the height of his confrontation with the “gang” (in a similar way, in the rescue scene in *Bat 21*, a flyer heads toward Hackman at the last moment). Mack has been forced out of the safety of his car and is being directly threatened, when a blaze of oncoming headlights announces that he will be saved. The camera tantalizes the audience as it hesitates to reveal the identity of the man who climbs out of the truck. The lens tracks from the truck to Mack, flanked by the young black men in various poses of aggression, and then back again to the tow-truck driver’s boots and slowly pans upwards. Here Kasdan reproduces the same low-angled shot he used moments before to stress the menacing nature of the black male faces that lean toward Mack in his car, a shot identical to one used in *Bat 21* as Hackman cowers away from the feet and legs of passing Viet Cong. Mack’s rescuer is revealed to be a black man, armed with an enormous
steel crowbar, a possible weapon, the size of which is exaggerated by the low camera angle. Before the audience can fully identify him, however, the tow-truck driver bends into the cab to reach for a cap.

This moment of uncertainty places in doubt the possible allegiance of the driver: is he really there to rescue Mack, as is implied by the change in the music, a signal upon which the audience has come to rely as a measure of mood? Or is the arrival of yet another black man an additional menace, as implied by the lingering of the camera over a body whose identity it is reluctant to reveal? The hesitation is only momentary, but it is sufficient to register ambiguity and doubt. Once the figure is revealed to be that of the actor, Danny Glover, the final threads of the complex Vietnam/Los Angeles web are woven in place. For Glover carries with him a built-in reference system from his previous roles, a filmic genealogy, if you will, that resolves any hesitation on the part of the audience about his possible allegiance. Indeed, Kasdan can toy so successfully with the audience’s expectations because he can rely on the fact that Glover’s appearance will instantly produce both the recognition and the assurance that he is a “good guy,” a good black man: after all, he was the heroic flyer who rescued Gene Hackman in *Bat 21* and the L.A.P.D.’s stalwart Sgt. Roger Murtaugh, whose partnership with Mel Gibson, in *Lethal Weapon*, has become a very profitable Hollywood legend.

The figure of Danny Glover as the tow-truck driver, Simon, is an important mechanism for the movie’s resolution of the dilemma inherent in one of our most dominant contemporary narratives—a dilemma captured in the cinematic hesitation I have already described—how, exactly, can the white middle class distinguish between the good and the bad black male? The moment of Mack’s rescue is a good point at which to interrupt the action in order to speculate about Kasdan’s manipulation of black masculinity in his choice of Glover to play Simon. It is through an analysis of the multiple ways in which the “good guy” genealogy has been formulated and established for Glover, a genealogy which film directors know exists in the popular imagination, that we can observe a particular narrative of race, nation, and masculinity at work.

Danny Glover’s cinematic career blossomed during the conservative years of Reaganism and Reagonomics, but the particular projection of black manhood that Glover has come to embody is anticipated in interesting ways by the actor Canada Lee. In 1947, in Robert Rossen’s *Body and Soul*, Canada Lee stars with John Garfield in a film about the corruption and violence present in the boxing world. Garfield plays the part of a young and talented challenger to the title of world champion held by Ben Chaplin (Canada Lee). Both boxers are virtually owned by a gambler and boxing financier called Roberts, played by Lloyd Goff, who betrays Chaplin when it is profitable for him to do so. Chaplin is severely injured in a fight which leaves him with a blood clot on his brain. While encouraging Chaplin to fight Davis, assuring him that Davis will go easy on him, Roberts tells Davis, who remains ignorant of Chaplin’s injury, to be brutal. When Chaplin is roughly defeated by Davis he is rushed to a hospital, and Davis discovers Roberts’s betrayal. Contrite, Charlie Davis employs Ben Chaplin as his trainer, but Ben becomes much more: he becomes a voice of wisdom, an adviser, and a friend who, in contrast to Roberts, always has Charlie’s interests at heart. He is not only a black man defeated and in a servile role; he is also proud, independent, and occupies the moral high ground. Chaplin is the only incorruptible man in the film, and when he dies, it is only his body that has gone; the moral and ethical superiority of his soul increases in power. In a number of scenes saturated by the music of “Body and Soul,” Davis is finally persuaded to live up to the example of Ben Chaplin. When the ethical soul of the black man enters the white man’s body, it ensures a return to honesty, integrity, and the familial social order.

This type of black male-white male partnership returns during the Reagan years, a period in which the partnership is elaborated into a complex social, political, and emotional as well as ethical unit. In *Bat 21*, Danny Glover’s voice and his words of wisdom and advice are crucial to the eventual survival of the man he has to rescue. Like the character played by Canada Lee, Glover becomes obsessed with saving Hackman. He returns to fly over his position constantly, night and day, to the point
of exhaustion and potential sacrifice of his own life. The words spoken by Glover through the radio become a literal lifeline, offering comfort against feelings of vulnerability and bringing encouragement, warmth, and hope to counter Hackman's despair. Again, like Canada Lee, Glover is portrayed as the man who can help the hero save himself from his enemies and, most importantly, save himself from his own weaknesses and fears. Danny Glover's film performances are a very significant elaboration of this portrayal of black manhood and constitute a complex, if contradictory, referential history of contemporary meanings of race and masculinity.

Danny Glover made his first movie appearance in the 1979 Escape from Alcatraz, in which he played one of many anonymous black male convicts. In 1981 he was cast in Chu Chu and the Philly Flash as a member of a group of homeless men and women who lived in San Francisco's ferry terminal. In this screwball comedy, Glover's black masculinity is rendered harmless as he forms part of an inept team whose antics resemble those of the Keystone Cops. The following year Glover appeared in the avant garde film Out!, aka Deadly Drifter. Though in Out! Glover has the part of an urban revolutionary, complete with black leather coat and a stick of dynamite, he is not cast as a member of a threateningly dangerous black revolutionary army. On the contrary, Glover is, again, the only black member of a white collective and, toward the end of the film, is partnered with Peter Coyote in a mildly comic relationship. The film is an absurdist dismantling of revolutionary aims and methods through an existential journey across the United States. The desire for revolution is transformed into a New Age meditation on the moral and ethical superiority of native peoples and whales.

In 1984, however, Glover moves away from the syndrome of black male as criminal/outcast in his role of a laboratory assistant, Loomis, in Fred Schepisi's Iceman. Though Loomis is a minor role, this is Glover's first opportunity to perform the part of a black male with a heart. The Iceman is a Neanderthal found frozen in the ice and brought back to life by a team of scientists; he is then kept under observation in an artificial habitat as if he were a specimen in a cage. In a brief but significant scene, the Glover character allies himself with the people who condemn this captivity on moral grounds and unlocks the door to let the Iceman escape, thus prefiguring his many later roles as a savior.

The role of Mose in Robert Benton's Places in the Heart, 1984, provides one of the keys to the development of Glover's cinematic genealogy as a good, trustworthy black man. At the beginning of Places in the Heart, set in Texas in 1935 at the height of the Depression, Mose is a hobo and petty thief who steals the silver of a newly widowed young woman (Sally Field) while claiming to be looking for work. Field's husband and provider, the town sheriff, has recently been shot and killed by a drunken young black man, so the threat to the white family from lawless black men has multiple dimensions. Indeed, Glover's character could be described as a "deadly drifter," one who steals what little of value is owned by Field and her children, who are struggling to keep their farm from falling into the hands of a bank that wants to foreclose on its mortgage. When the thief is arrested, however, and returned to her house for identification, Field lies, claiming that Mose carries her silver with her permission in order to sell it for her. This generous action transforms the black man into an absolutely loyal bondsman and deliverer of a white family. This loyalty is supplemented by seemingly unlimited expressions of sacrifice and nobility, as Mose works to save the family in spite of tremendous opposition. He becomes their archetypal male provider, savior, and defender against all threats from the institutional forces of the dominant society, represented by the Bank and the Cotton Gin.

However, while Mose can successfully perform as the brains and the brawn hidden behind the skirts of a white woman, he fails to establish his patriarchal equality as a black man confronting white men. When threatened by the manager of the bank and the owner of the cotton gin, in their guise as leaders of the local Klan, Mose is forced to flee for his life. Ultimately, the black male ends as he began, without a place in this community—a figure of nobility but apart. In addition, the sense of worth of the black man is not gained through self-knowledge or self-
respect but is granted from the outside. Mose's black masculinity gains its masculinity, as humanity, through white recognition: in the closing moments of the film, before he has to leave the town forever, Field acts like a queen bestowing a knighthood when she acknowledges Mose's loyalty and achievements: “Remember, you did this.” It is this act of acknowledgment that remains with the character of Mose (and the audience). In the absence of a reward in the form of material goods, profit, or a social role in the community, these words are meant to sustain and comfort Mose. Recognition is his only consolation for his necessary racial exclusion from the family and the community for whose survival he is responsible.

In this sense, the resolution of *Places in the Heart* reproduces the resolution of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, an ideological paradigm that still appears to govern the Hollywood creation of the trustworthy black man. Each narrative genealogy of race and nation works in a structurally similar fashion: the imagining of the good black is dependent upon the rejection and removal of the alien black presence. Black saviors have to return to “Africa” or go to heaven. Though “Africa” as a literal reference point no longer functions in the same way that it did for Stowe, as a possible metaphoric and material place for disposing of an alien element that threatens to disrupt national unity, contemporary film directors do not have to explain to their audiences where black males are headed when they disappear from the screen. Hollywood can rely on the existence of the prison and the ghetto to function as equivalent spaces of exclusion in our contemporary political imagination.

As Glover walked out of a place in the heart of a Texas community, he walked into his first role as a police officer in *Witness* in 1985. In this film Glover was still being cast in an ambiguous role. His character, McFee, is simultaneously inside of and outside of the law, a member of a police conspiracy to steal two and a half million dollars in drug money, and a cop who kills his fellow officers. Such ambiguity in relation to the law is resolved and ultimately transcended in *Lethal Weapon* and the series that followed.

A much more significant development in Glover’s increasingly complex cinematic persona is his appearance, that same year, in Lawrence Kasdan’s *Silverado*, a Western, in which he stars with Kevin Kline, Kevin Costner, and Glenn Scott. At first *Silverado* looks as if it is going to merely reproduce elements from Glover’s previous characterizations. Like Sally Field, Scott and Kline win Glover’s loyalty after they do him a favor, saving him from arrest by a racist town sheriff played, most incongruously, by John Cleese. Glover’s character later has occasion to accuse Kline of a lack of moral and ethical commitment when it appears that Kline’s self-interest is steering him to support the wrong side in a battle between settlers and the evil cattle barons who have purchased the protection of the local, and extremely corrupt, law enforcement officials. Glover occupies the moral high ground and eventually persuades his white buddy to defend the settlers. A close friendship develops between them, a partnership that prefigures the relation between Kline and Glover in *Grand Canyon* and Mel Gibson and Glover in the *Lethal Weapon* series.

While Glover’s Vietnam roles establish the historical source of the modern black male/white male partnership, *Silverado* brings out the homosocial and at times homoerotic nature of the relationship between white and black men—a homoeroticism that will eventually come to characterize much of the humor of the *Lethal Weapon* films. The “special” nature of the friendship between Kline and Glover in *Silverado* is established primarily through editing—the cross cutting of shot and counter-shot of glances or lingering looks, the creation of frequent eye-contact intended to suggest more than is spoken in words. The film is also homosocial and frequently phallocentric in many of its general techniques and effects. The mise-en-scene for the development of the relationship among all four men, as they travel across country, is a landscape replete with phallic imagery, a terrain that both evokes and sustains their commonality.

The cinematic chronology of Glover’s fictional black masculinity advances another step toward patriarchal power in the role of Albert Johnson (Mister) in Steven Spielberg’s film based on Alice Walker’s novel, *The Color Purple* (1985). Glover is a glowing, threatening
patriarchal presence as a husband and father. Incapable of expressing emotion toward other men, not even for his own son and father, Mister represents the constant threat of violence against women. But this black patriarchal power and rage reign only over black women and younger black men, not over whites. However, the character Glover plays has to be capable of transformation as he ages alone, and has to persuade the audience that he atones. Clearly, Glover's experience with his previous film personifications, plus his talent, make this transformation convincing, and *The Color Purple* confirms that Glover can play both the brutal and the sensitive black man.  

Between 1987 and 1992, Danny Glover starred in a number of films which reproduced the ideological terms within which the utopian dimensions of Hollywood's contemporary interracial masculine romance are imagined and secured. The historical experience of Vietnam is evoked as the source of this romance—a partnership which establishes equality in the shared experience of war and defeat. In Glover's own film genealogy, his role as Captain Bartholomew Clark in *Bat 21* (1988), as Sergeant Roger Murtaugh in the *Lethal Weapon* series (1987, 1989, and 1992), and as Frank "Dookie" Camparelli in *Flight of the Intruder* (1990) provide substantial examples of the cinematic black and white masculine partnerships that transcend racialization.

*Flight of the Intruder*, in which Glover stars with Willem Dafoe and Brad Johnson, elaborates on the persona Glover plays in *Bat 21.* As Captain of a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier off the coast of Vietnam in September 1972, Glover plays the part of an authoritarian but nurturing parental male toward the younger men in his charge. A strict but caring disciplinarian, Glover wins the respect and love of his subordinates. "Christ, all we've really got is each other," he teaches them. The armed forces are represented as an all-male substitute or equivalent for the family, a unit which excludes women. In this homosocial order race is not the important issue; the principal concern is with ways of bonding. For example, in *Flight* Frank Camparelli identifies himself, and is characterized by others, as a Mafia boss. The reference to the Mafia, confirmed by his surname, evokes an alternative and familial structure of patriarchal allegiance, power, and control. This kind of homosocial partnership has become of increasing importance to male Hollywood film directors in developing an explicitly antifeminist male culture.

Richard Donner's *Lethal Weapon* series exemplifies this interracial male alliance against women. Considered together, the three films document the development of a close and increasingly intimate partnership between an older black and a younger white male. But the origin of this phenomenon does not lie in the history of the movement to gain civil rights. It is the history of the desegregation of the United States armed forces and the "policing" of Southeast Asia that enables the relationship of equality between Martin Riggs and Roger Murtaugh. Men become buddies not in a movement for liberation but in a shared experience as oppressors, and their friendships are born outside the continental United States. What Riggs and Murtaugh share is the experience of Vietnam, which is the ground of their apparent equality and the basis for their mutual respect.

*Lethal Weapon*, the first in the series, forges Riggs and Murtaugh into an unbeatable fighting team as they defeat a rogue group of special forces mercenaries against a Los Angeles landscape that increasingly resembles Vietnam as the film progresses. Like Kasdan, Donner recreates Vietnam within Los Angeles. "We're gonna get bloody on this one, Roger. . . . You'll just have to trust me," Riggs declares. Both Murtaugh and Riggs are captured and tortured and have to learn that all they can trust, all they can rely on is each other. In the closing moment of the film, the rain-soaked muddy fields of Vietnam are explicitly evoked as Riggs is involved in hand to hand combat on Murtaugh's front lawn, which is being drenched by a burst hydrant.

In *Lethal Weapon 2*, the national significance of their partnership is established in a battle to save the nation from a drug cartel run by South African diplomats. Riggs and Murtaugh's partnership and friendship also advance in this film. When the diplomats call Riggs a "Kaffir-lover," his antiracist credentials are secured. In *Lethal Weapon 3*, Los
Angeles and Vietnam are again fused in the landscape as the two heroes wage war against a home-grown enemy who has declared war on the entire L.A.P.D., a police force which at this stage of the series is on the front line of a battle to save the nation.

The Murtaugh-Riggs partnership does not so much exclude women as relegate them to their proper sphere. In the first Lethal Weapon, when each man is still rather wary of the other, they share a joke about Trish Murtaugh’s (Darlene Love) cooking. In the sequel Riggs and Murtaugh virtually share in the fruits of Trish’s domestic labor. “Where does Trish keep my laundry, man?” queries Riggs, and they both agree that if only the bad guys had planted their bomb in Trish’s stove rather than in the Murtaughs’ bathroom, “they could have ended a lot of needless suffering right there.”

The relationship between Riggs and Murtaugh has an explicitly homoerotic dimension which seems both to attract and repel Richard Donner. The film constantly flirts with homoeroticism and parodies it in a homophobic manner. In the first film, “What are you, a fag?” shouts Riggs, in response to Murtaugh’s jumping on top of him to try to extinguish the flames that engulf his body. Lethal Weapon 2 has a series of running jokes that spin out of a scene in which Murtaugh is trapped, sitting on a toilet rigged to explode if he should stand up. In Lethal Weapon 3 the homoeroticism is somewhat more mature and less directly inspired by anal humor. But at the same time Donner is clearly fascinated by the representation of homosexual attraction. As Lethal Weapon 2 ends, Riggs is in Murtaugh’s arms, possibly fatally injured. Their verbal exchange condenses the conflicted and contradictory aura of homoeroticism. “You’re not dead until I tell you,” insists Murtaugh, “now breathe!” Riggs’s response is, “Did anyone ever tell you, you really are a beautiful man? Give us a kiss before they come.” “Where did that bullet hit you anyway?” Murtaugh wants to know. The ambiguity of this exchange is left unresolved and perhaps even heightened by Donner’s choice of closing music, George Harrison’s “Cheer Down.” As the credits roll Harrison sings,

There’s no tears to be shed
Gonna love you instead
I want you around
Cheer down.24

In Grand Canyon, however, Kasdan deliberately distances his male characters from the homoeroticism that permeates the Lethal Weapon series. When the noise of the helicopter which opens the film fades, a basketball net appears, surrounded by black hands reaching upward. In a black-and-white opening sequence on an urban basketball court, the camera wanders over the bodies of the black players, torsos, legs, hands, and feet. There is a clear visual analogy with the second half of the credit sequence, which takes place in the Forum and is filmed in color. However, the force of the analogy is not established in the black-white commonality of the basketball court, a site which is reserved for the safe portrayal of interracial intimacy among men; rather, the analogy works through the gaze of the camera over black male bodies in the first sequence and the sexually predatory gaze of Mack across the court at the women who walk by. In this part of the credit sequence again the camera lingers over parts of bodies, particularly the torsos and bouncing breasts of the women as they walk in rhythm to the music.

Certainly Mack’s blatant stare of sexual desire at these passing female bodies is intended to emphasize his heterosexuality and to prevent any misinterpretation of his later feelings for Simon. But these opening sequences and the confrontation scene that follows do establish the cultural spaces the film designates as safe. Safe spaces are cultural sites in which whites can be in close proximity to, intimate with, and gaze at black bodies. The two opening sequences, the neighborhood basketball court and the Forum game, prefigure the nature of the close relationship that develops between Simon and Mack; a friendship that comes to a cinematic climax when they play basketball with each other in Mack’s driveway.

In Lethal Weapon 3, one particular scene highlights the relationship
between Martin Riggs and Roger Murtaugh. This scene thoroughly dissects the terms and conditions of their friendship, attempting to cast it in the mythical dimensions of the relationship between Huck and Jim on their raft in Mark Twain's 1885 novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Riggs and Murtaugh face a crisis as partners and as friends, a crisis as serious as that faced by Huck and Jim when they missed the entry into the Ohio river and sailed ever deeper into the slave states of the South. In Mark Twain's novel, this mistake clinched the historical terms and conditions of Jim's existence and his dependence on Huck Finn: as a black male, in order to survive he had to "belong" to someone.

In *Lethal Weapon 3*, in a similar fashion, Donner reworks the contemporary terms and conditions of the relationship between his white and black male protagonists. The crisis has been precipitated by two events: Murtaugh is agonizing over the fact that in an armed confrontation he shot and killed a fifteen-year old young black male whom he discovered to be his son's best friend; Riggs is distraught because their partnership is about to be dissolved when Murtaugh retires from the force in just three days.

This long, eight-minute segment explores the complex and contradictory possibilities for expressing interracial male intimacy, and while the scene is, at times, intensely homoerotic, it also closes off, both visually and verbally, the possibility that this intimacy could encompass a homosexual relation. As Huck and Jim's navigational error determined the public nature of their relation to each other, so Donner opens this scene in a way that determines what follows.

Riggs goes to find Murtaugh, who is hiding out on his boat drinking whiskey. He finds Murtaugh drunk and apparently out of control. Murtaugh holds a gun to Riggs's head and, in clichéd terms, threatens to harm the best friend he ever had. Why would Murtaugh betray his friend, his "brother" who has clearly demonstrated his loyalty to him? The moment is fraught with the tension of Riggs's agony and the betrayal he feels at Murtaugh's imminent retirement. This tension creates and reproduces on the screen a contemporary political anxiety: that black America, having demanded and gained equality, has somehow betrayed the white and middle-class America that graciously acceded to these demands. The political effect is that when Riggs shouts at Murtaugh, "You selfish bastard," a large segment of white male America makes the same accusation.

The accusation of the betrayal of white America by an aggressive black America informs and shapes the work of a number of contemporary liberal political analysts. Andrew Hacker, in *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile and Unequal*, addresses this anxiety and argues that the processes of equalization and nationalization imagined to be inherent in the social consensus to grant civil rights were, indeed, only imaginary. He concludes that such a consensus no longer exists and that America must be regarded as two separate nations confronting each other. Hacker situates his discussion of the liberal anxiety evident in this political crisis in the context of the black urban rebellions of the late 1960s.

After those disturbances, race relations never returned to their former plane. Whites ceased to identify black protests with a civil rights movement led by students and ministers. Rather, they saw a resentful and rebellious multitude, intent on imposing its presence on the rest of society. Blacks were seen as trying to force themselves into places and positions where they were not wanted or for which they lacked the competence. As the 1970s started, so came a rise in crimes, all too many of them with black perpetrators. By that point, many white Americans felt they had been betrayed. Worsening relations between the races were seen as largely due to the behavior of blacks, who had abused the invitations to equal citizenship white America had been tendering.

Hacker's belief that white Americans have lost all sympathy for black Americans shapes his political agenda.

Belief in this apparent lack of sympathy also influences Donner's decision to locate the source for his characters' mutual respect in South-
east Asia rather than in the history of the struggle for civil rights. Hacker attempts to regain this lost sympathy through an extraordinary performance of intellectual blackface. In a chapter called “Being Black in America,” in which he imagines what it would be like to be black, he reveals an intense masculine anxiety about black male bodies.

Hacker is only one of many political critics who are busily constructing genealogies of race and nation that are centrally concerned with white male anxiety, particularly liberal anxiety, about relationships with black men. His argument that white men feel betrayed by actually or potentially rebellious black men is echoed in Thomas Edsall’s very influential book, Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics, in which such betrayal is used to explain the alienation of white Democratic [male] voters from the special-interest politics of racial injustice. In the popular cultural imagination such anxiety is most frequently paired with the nightmarish landscape of urban crisis.

What Grand Canyon, the Lethal Weapon series, and a number of other contemporary Hollywood films have in common is their unspoken attempt to resolve and overcome a national, racialized crisis through an intimate interracial male partnership. What Danny Glover’s cinematic career illustrates is a sequence of performances of black manhood which embodies all the ethical codes of white middle-class America. What Kasdan incorporates into Grand Canyon and Donner utilizes in the Lethal Weapon series is the national embodiment of the perfect black male: a sensitive black father and relentless seeker of justice. The Danny Glover persona has become the lethal weapon that is wielded by Hollywood directors to fight representations of black men that they define and create as dangerous. The cultural construction of the bad guy is a direct political response to the national bourgeois dilemma: how to distinguish the good from the bad black men.

In Grand Canyon Kasdan grants Simon the moral authority to deny common humanity to the rebellious “gang” of five young men. This moral authority is acquired gradually and in a number of ways. First, Simon manages to extricate Mack and himself from the clutches of the young men without resorting to violence. He establishes who made the call for help and then continues to talk to Mack about the problem with the car as if the others weren’t there. This behavior is quickly identified by the young men as a sign of disrespect. Next, Simon tries to persuade them that he is just doing his job. As the young men are unresponsive to the terms of the work ethic, Simon tries another tactic. He identifies the young man he supposes is the leader and takes him aside. He explains that he is responsible for the truck, Mack’s car, and Mack himself and asks, as a favor, to be allowed to go on his way. This exchange is a very important moment because it establishes the ground upon which Simon’s role as a mouthpiece for the philosophy of the film will be built. The young man asks: “Are you askin’ me a favor as a sign of respect, or are you askin’ me a favor ‘cos I got the gun?” Simon pauses and then replies: “Man, the world ain’t supposed to work like this, maybe you don’t know that but this ain’t the way it’s supposed to be. I’m supposed to be able to do my job without asking you if I can. That dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you ripping him off. Everything is supposed to be different than what it is.” The young man is clearly puzzled by this response and says, “So, what’s your answer?” To which Simon replies, “You don’t have the gun, we ain’t having this conversation,” which gets the response, “That’s what I thought, no gun, no respect, that’s why I always carry the gun.”

Having made the point that Simon can voice the moral codes and ethics of the middle class and be streetwise at the same time, the Simon character is also used to dehumanize the young men. In a conversation with Mack that takes place back at the service station while waiting for the car to be fixed, Simon adopts a folksy persona, a persona from which many Americans seem to draw comfort, and compares the young men to predatory sharks. Simon explains to Mack that what happened to him was a matter of chance, that “one day, just one particular day you bump into the big shark.” “Now the big shark don’t hate you, he has no feelings for you at all, you look like food to him. . . . Those boys back there, they got nothing to lose. If you just happen to be swimming along and bump into them, well . . . It might not be worth worrying about; it’s like being in a plane crash.” Once he has dismissed these “boys” from
the realm of humanity, they can be conveniently forgotten. They do not appear again in the film and presumably disappear into jail, say, or become urban homicide statistics. For do we really care or even think about what happens to sharks as long as they aren’t preying upon us?

What inspires fear has been identified, given a body, but no name. The young black men presented as “gang” have served their purpose. This use of Glover to annihilate an aggressive black male force is even more explicit in Predator 2, in which the streets of Los Angeles have become “a slaughterhouse.” Pitted against Jamaican drug lords, King Willie and his Voodoo posse, Glover also expels an extraterrestrial predator with long locks.

But in addition to playing a crucial role in the expulsion of an alien black presence in films like Grand Canyon, the Lethal Weapon series, Dead Man Out (1989), and more recent films like The Saint of Fort Washington (1993), Glover has performed another important role: that of father confessor and psychological counsellor to white men. In these films he acts as a sympathetic ear and a wise man, fostering the psychological healing of white men damaged by the stresses of postmodern life. Glover has become identified as the one who manages to persuade white men to recognize, understand, and express the truth about themselves to themselves. In his person Hollywood, in addition to producing the black male as an outcast who threatens to undermine the very foundations of America, adopts the black man as a sympathetic cypher, a means for white men to find meaning within themselves and discover the true meaning of their existence. On the one hand, these meanings are established for the audience of these films but, on the other, they reflect the values of the producers and directors. In their minds and films reside myriad references, meanings, and relationships that can be endlessly drawn upon and recycled. Glover has come to occupy a particularly important position as a teller of stories that modern America needs to hear, an urban folk figure still in touch with the most important social values and ethics which a postmodern society is in danger of forgetting.
how his performance is a public forum "within which various models of gender organization . . . are asserted, adopted, contested and negotiated." See Susan McClary, Feminine Endings, pp. 7–8, 25.

67. See Krin Gabbard, "Signifying the Phallus: Mo' Better Blues and Representations of the Jazz Trumpet," Cinema Journal, 32, 1 (Fall 1992):43–62. "On the most obvious level," argues Krin Gabbard, "the phallicism of the jazz trumpet resides in pitch, speed, and emotional intensity, all of which Armstrong greatly expanded in the 1920s. The many artists who followed Armstrong have found numerous ways of dealing with this dimension of the trumpet. By contrast the Eurocentric virtuoso who can play high and fast is not necessarily phallic: what a symphony player might call bad technique—an extremely wide vibrato or a 'smeared' note, for example—can become a forceful, even virtuosic device in the hands of a jazz trumpeter. Stage deportment and the musician's clothing can also become part of the phallic style. Consider the pelvic thrusts that Dizzy Gillespie performed in front of his big band in the 1940s, or the 'Prince of Darkness' mode in which Miles Davis clothed himself during his final two decades."

68. In the Milestones CD liner notes the recording dates for the album are incorrectly given as February 4 and March 4. They actually are April 2 and 3. Miles Davis, Milestones, Columbia, CR 40837.


70. Hentoff, Jazz Life, p. 220.

71. Delany, Motion of Light, pp. 205–206.

72. Davis, Miles, p. 226.

73. Davis, Miles, p. 226.

74. J. C. Thomas, Chasin' the Trane, p. 109.


76. Delany, Motion of Light, p. 326.


78. Bill Evans, "Improvisation in Jazz," Kind of Blue.

79. Joe Goldberg described Davis's group, which was together from the end of 1955 until the spring of 1957, as follows: "At least part of the unique quality of the quintet performances lay in a particular principle which Davis grasped, a principle so simple that it apparently eluded everyone else. To put it in terms of this particular group, a quintet is not always a quintet. It could also be a quartet featuring Miles, and, at different times on the same tune, it could be a quartet featuring Coltrane or a trio featuring either Garland or Chambers. The Davis rhythm section, Jones in particular, was well aware of this, and gave each of the three principal soloists his own best backing." Joe Goldberg, quoted in Rosenthal, Hard Bop, pp. 49–50. I extend this principle to the sextet.

80. I am thinking here, particularly, of the various performances of "My Funny Valentine" and the relationship Davis develops with pianist Herbie Hancock. Much more work remains to be done, but it has begun. See Howard Brofsky, "Miles Davis and My Funny Valentine: The Evolution of a Solo," Black Music Research Journal (1983):23–45; and the very interesting essay by Robert Walser, "Out of Notes: Signification, Interpretation and the Problem of Miles Davis," in Krin Gabbard, ed., Jazz Among the Discourses (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 165–188. Brofsky compares three versions of the tune; Walser concentrates on the 1964 live performance with Herbie Hancock. There are, however, five versions of the tune easily available on CD, three of which are recordings of live performances; comparing them would make a fascinating study. Miles Davis, Cookin' with the Miles Davis Quintet, Prestige OJCCD-128–2; '58 Miles, Columbia CR 47835; The Complete Concert 1964, Columbia CK 48821; and Miles Davis the Complete Live at the Plugged Nickel 1965, Columbia CRX 66958 [a set of seven CDs].


82. See, for example, the account of the relationship that Delany and Marilyn Hacker have with Bob in Delany, Motion of Light, pp. 380–514, weeks that Delany refers to as the happiest in his life. See also Samuel R. Delany, Heavenly Breakfast: An Essay on the Winter of Love (Flint, MI: Bamberger Books, 1997), a reflection on living in urban communes and cooperatives during the winter of 1967–68. Delany's fiction consistently explores the possibilities of challenging familial structures and conventions for sexual unions, but see in particular Samuel R. Delany, Trouble on Triton (New York: Bantam Books, 1979), for a story that is based on various forms of cooperative living.


6. Lethal Weapons and City Games


3. It is clear that this association between the war zones of Southeast Asia and Los Angeles has been established incrementally. Of particular importance to this process are the three Lethal Weapon films, which will be discussed later. Lethal Weapon 3 is a culmination of the themes of the previous two: policing indistinguishable from military intervention, and the burning of a housing com
plex is visually evocative of the burning of villages in Vietnam. Our reading of this scene of fire is, of course, directly influenced by **Apocalypse Now**, which reinforces my sense that Hollywood has and continues to mediate and inform this process of transition in the political imagination of the culture industry.


5. Emphasis as spoken.


7. This is a moment in which a scene of home is intercut into the nightmare journey.


9. I adopted the term “good guy” because of the following incident. When I was talking to a research assistant at the Video Library in Philadelphia who was helping me locate a copy of one of Danny Glover’s early films, *Out*, he reacted with sharp surprise to my description of Glover’s role in that film as an urban revolutionary. “But,” he said in a shocked tone, “Danny Glover is a good guy!”

10. Perhaps it is crass to point to the biblical resonance of the choice of Simon as a name for Mack’s rescuer, but it gains significance through the consistent religious references in the film, particularly its concern with spiritual and miraculous transformation. Kasdan’s “gang” take pleasure not only in threatening physical harm but in taunting and mocking Mack. “And they spat upon him, and took the reed, and smote him on the head. And after that they mocked him, they took the robe off from him, and put his own raiment on him, and led him away to crucify him. And as they came out they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name: him they compelled to bear his cross.” Matthew 27, 30–32. Even if the biblical allusion works only at a subliminal level, it is important to recognize that Mack (and the white middle class) are being rescued from a possible crucifixion, a metaphor which has political and ideological meanings. In such a scenario, Mack (and the white middle class) are innocent victims of unjust persecution.


