

# Arts

## Gangs show their 'Colors' in film about ghetto life

"Colors" begins as another buddy-buddy crime drama that Hollywood serves up as standard summer fare. On the other side of town from Beverly Hills, veteran cop Hodges (Robert Duvall) breaks in a hot-headed rookie (Sean Penn) to the ways of the street. But director Dennis Hopper and screenwriter

Michael Schiffer use the story of initiation as a means to another end: a portrait of gangs dominating contemporary urban ghettos.

The film provides an unusually rich and detailed vision of the material features of the ghetto world. A monotonous sea of dilapidated housing projects sprawls before the

### Christopher Sellers Cinema

camera, threaded by mazes of alleyways covered with graffiti. Flimsy walls provide plenty of objects for flashy destruction in the chase scenes. Each gang, particularly the Blood gang, carouses across the screen as an agglomeration of dialect, rap music, clothing with the bright color of its allegiance and myriad illicit acts.

Such a portrayal may be vulnerable to charges of stereotyping, but much of its power adheres in its abstracting emphasis on the gang as a whole rather than on any individuals. The

Bloods become a principle of chaos; representatives of the irrational id-like forces that the movie suggests surge through this world. The Bloods' violence, exemplified by the incidental murder of a woman next door to one of their targets, often springs from no motive other than the naked display of power. In the midst of such serious purposes and effects, the comedic forays of Damon Williams (of "Saturday Night Live" fame) appear strangely out of context.

By the second half of the film, the police appear clearly ineffectual against the gangs and their reign of terror. Sean Penn's character's attacks on gang members come from his own nervousness and fear as much as from a desire to right wrongs. Not

only does Penn adopt gang tactics, but the police even pick up the dialect of the gangs and use it among themselves.

Toward the end of the movie, camera shots from a police helicopter during nighttime chase scenes symbolize the scope of police hegemony in the ghetto, as the helicopter spotlight illuminates only a tiny circle of the vast expanse of the city below. Eventually, even the perspective of the narrative shifts from the point of view of the policemen to that of the Crips gang, whose members receive a more sympathetic and individualized depiction than the Bloods.

The Crips, rather than the two policemen, mete out justice to the Bloods in the end, yet they also ally themselves with the nihilistic energies of the ghetto by a final act of violence.

To anyone concerned with the problem of poverty in American society, the message of resignation implicit in "Colors" offers a severe challenge. Though the brunt of its attack centers on the conservative solution of direct and forceful social control, liberal solutions don't remain immune to the movie's veiled criticism. The social worker in the film, though himself a former gang member, appears isolated and impotent, so seductive and pervasive are gang practices of drugs and violence within the ghetto community.

If the viewer can take away anything more from this movie than an evening of riveting entertainment, it is that radically new ideas and interventions will be necessary if this culture of poverty is ever to be rid of the entrapment and physical destruction it wreaks upon its own.

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