

Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You*: A "ladder-climber" in the corporate world

By Matthew Brennan
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Written and directed by Boots Riley

Sorry To Bother You is a dark comedy written and directed by Boots Riley, the artist, political activist and rapper from Oakland, California. He is best-known as a longtime member of the music group The Coup.

The film, which reportedly took Riley eight years to get to theaters, is a satire about the oppressive work environment many people currently face and its connection to other aspects of their lives. The plot relies on "magical realist" touches, with the film taking place in a city that is both Oakland ... and not-quite-Oakland. An intriguing and distinct score by the music group Tune-Yards permeates throughout.

Sorry to Bother You contains certain refreshing insights and sequences, and Riley at his sharpest captures some of the hypocrisy so rife in official American business and political life. The film makes no bones about its intention to skewer capitalism, as well as its sympathies for the working class. This is to Riley's credit. However, these merits don't make the various problems and limitations disappear.

The film centers around Cassius "Cash" Green, impressively played by actor Lakeith Stanfield (*Atlanta*). Cash is a young person struggling to make ends meet in Oakland. Living in his uncle's garage and racked by anxiety, out of desperation he takes a telemarketing job at a company called RegalView.

Cash's girlfriend Detroit (Tessa Thompson) is an artist also struggling to get by, working as a sign "twirler" for various companies. Outside of work, she creates performance art installations and takes part in a "guerrilla" art movement, the Left Eye activists, who attack corporate advertisements around town.

Early scenes convincingly and often comically capture Green's painful situation. When buying gas on the way to his first day at work, he asks the attendant to put "40 on 2," handing her 40 cents. An early love scene with his

girlfriend Detroit is interrupted when he accidentally opens the garage door of his "room."

Along the way, there are ubiquitous advertisements from a company named Worry Free, which touts "lifetime contracts" for its workers, and showcases a video of a dozen workers discussing their happiness living in a single makeshift, highly decorated prison-like room.

Once at RegalView, Cash experiences discomfort, even misery, with his initial "cold calling." Riley exposes something about the callousness of the job and its painful impact both on the workers and the targets of their phone calls. As Cash reaches strangers, his work desk "magically" crashes into their homes, interrupting families eating dinner or couples making love or a woman grieving for her terminally ill husband. Cash awkwardly and nervously tries to sell them things they clearly don't need. Self-important and overbearing managers watch and critique every exchange.

Two plot developments early on in *Sorry to Bother You* will have later repercussions. First, while at RegalView, Cash meets Squeeze (Steven Yeun), who turns out to be a covert union organizer and who sees in Cash and his friend/co-worker Sal (Jermaine Fowler) potential allies in helping to create a telemarketers union.

Second, in the midst of his difficulties on the phone, Cash speaks to an older telemarketer, Langston (Danny Glover), who teaches him to use a "white voice" to generate more sales. Langston demonstrates the latter, and *Sorry to Bother You* employs a "magical" over-dub mechanism whereby a white actor speaks in Langston's stead. Langston explains, "It's not even how white people necessarily talk. But with your white voice you are acting like you don't need any money; you've never been fired—only laid off; things in your life are taken care of..."

Cash finds this "white voice" (performed by comedian

David Cross), and his ensuing success leads him to be promoted as a “power caller” on RegalView’s “elite” top floor. Meanwhile, Squeeze sets in motion plans for a strike by the telemarketers.

Faced with choosing between his career and his fellow workers, Cash decides to become a “ladder-climber,” while the other workers picket against armed guards outside RegalView’s premises. Now one of the “power callers,” Cash learns he will be selling subtly disguised slave labor for the Worry Free company.

Invited to a Worry Free company party presided over by CEO Steve Lift (played with convincing energy by Arnie Hammer), Cash is exposed to the debauchery and empty-headedness of the upper-middle class. At some point in the evening, Lift demands Cash “rap” for the benefit of the half-naked, drugged-up revelers at the party. In one of the more amusing and hard-hitting sequences in *Sorry to Bother You*, Cash—who visibly can neither rap nor wants to!—decides to mimic “gangster” rap tropes, repeating a derogatory racial slur dozens of times. The crowd eats it up. In mocking the backwardness of gangster rap here, Riley is on healthy and firm ground.

Without giving too much away, Cash ultimately learns of a ghastly project aimed at maximizing productivity and profits for Worry Free. He eventually reconnects with Detroit and Squeeze. A final showdown ensues with somewhat cartoonish qualities.

All told, the strengths and weaknesses of Riley’s film are often at war with each other.

On the one hand, the writer-director has a certain feeling for the overall rottenness and untenability of the present situation. *Sorry to Bother You* suggests that large numbers of people are trapped in impossible conditions or face intolerable choices. Several phenomena are admirably lampooned: telemarketing and its dehumanizing impact on everyone involved; the relentless selfishness of those determined to join the ranks of the upper-middle class; the degraded character of much of what passes for popular art and culture; and the filthiness of Wall Street (in one especially pointed scene, the stock market responds with overwhelming approval to news that appalls the viewer).

Riley also places in the background elements of life generally neglected in filmmaking. Shots of homeless encampments are scattered throughout the film. Men and women of every race and many ethnicities are shown struggling.

In other words, there are some relatively humane, entertaining and sensitive features to Riley’s film. On the

other hand, these features and the more interesting observations are trapped within a very narrow framework, which seriously hinders the film.

The fight against RegalView—a company that helps sell slave labor and military weapons—is reduced to the building of a trade union.

Even those who have not paid close attention to the evolution of the unions into corporatist organizations hostile to their own members could hardly find this tepid solution inspiring, let alone believe it represents a meaningful response to the corporate criminality in question. Here is Riley’s Achilles’ Heel, the product of his long history on the middle-class left.

There is also the device of the “white voice” that various news outlets (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*) and pseudo-left groups (Socialist Worker) have generally hailed as a brilliant device. In fact, it is a weak point in the film and damages its overall tone and impact.

To his credit, Riley largely avoids racialist narratives, but the “white voice” business is a concession to bankrupt “white privilege” theories. To its credit, the film itself contradicts the notion that one “gets ahead” because of one’s “whiteness.” As Cash progresses, it is his willingness to betray his friends and to sell slave labor—not his “white voice”—that ultimately ingratiates him to RegalView and the despicable Lift.

The device is of a piece with other elements in *Sorry to Bother You* that the filmmakers have not really bothered to work through. The most serious criticism one might make of the film is that Riley doesn’t sufficiently challenge himself in a number of critical ways, political and aesthetic. The writer-director, who has a political background in black nationalism, Maoism and the Occupy Wall Street movement, ultimately does not want to or cannot avoid simplistic, inadequate solutions to a very difficult social situation.

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