

Director of *Boyz n the Hood*, *Higher Learning* and other films focusing on the African-American working class and poor

## Film director John Singleton dead at age 51

By Nick Barrickman  
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On April 28, American film director John D. Singleton, best known for 1991's *Boyz n the Hood*, died due to complications following a stroke he had suffered earlier in the month. He was only 51.

Singleton directed nine feature-length films, while producing another 11, with numerous television, writing and acting credits also to his name. Throughout the 1990s, Singleton gained a measure of critical acclaim and commercial success for making films best described as coming-of-age “hood dramas”—films focusing on the lives of African-American youth in inner-city America.

His first film, *Boyz n the Hood* (featuring Cuba Gooding Jr., Laurence Fishburne and Angela Bassett), earned Singleton an Academy Award nomination as Best Director. He was only 22 years old at the time of shooting the film. The work has weaknesses bound up with its racialist outlook and moralizing tone. There are also serious awkwardnesses in the screenplay and dialogue (Singleton later admitted that he was only “learning” how to direct while the film was being made).

It is impossible to separate the more important flaws in Singleton's film from the genuine cultural problems of the period in which it was made. This was the reactionary era of the “final victory” of the free market and capitalism, the “end of socialism” and even the “end of history”! The population was bombarded with this drivel nearly 24 hours a day. It had an impact. Even those artists at the time who strove for a certain oppositional approach found it difficult to resist the supposedly insurmountable arguments in favor of the present system. “Opposition” often came to mean anger or resistance along racial or gender lines.

In *Boyz n the Hood*, there is a persistent and self-conscious racialist theme or mood: the viewer is continuously reminded that he or she is seeing a movie starring African Americans, in an African-American neighborhood, being directed by an African American. That kind of narrow outlook is artistically debilitating. The characters' interactions in Singleton's version of “real life” in inner-city “black America” largely feel imposed and stilted.

The director's own conceptions, or some version of them, presumably find expression in a monologue addressed to Tre (Gooding) and Ricky (Morris Chestnut) by Furious Styles, Tre's father (Fishburne): “What we need to do is keep everything in our neighborhood, everything, black. Black-owned with black money. Just like the Jews, the Italians, the Mexicans and the Koreans do.”

Along the same lines, Doughboy (Ice Cube) later remarks: “Turned on the TV this morning. Had this shit on about how we're living in a violent world. Showed all these foreign places. How foreigners live and all. I started thinking, man. Either they don't know, don't show or don't care about what's going on in the 'hood. They had all this foreign shit.”

This kind of severe backwardness or accommodation to backwardness was not going to help anyone.

Singleton, who also wrote the script, clearly did not see racism and the

social disaster in the US as being of a piece with the global situation facing the working class, including the Iraqi and Middle Eastern populations under assault in the first Gulf War. He chose to view the condition of blacks in America as a moral and cultural issue bound up with being excluded from receiving proper “representation.” As though the vast numbers of Iraqis, Serbs, Haitians, Somalis and Rwandans, who were victims of imperialism in those years, were being given privileged treatment by having their deaths reported on the evening news!

Ultimately, *Boyz n the Hood* is most memorable for its jarring depictions of violence and social tragedy in inner-city Los Angeles, features of life that overtake the film's characters without warning. Tre and his childhood friends Ricky and Doughboy are forced to grow up fast—some of them only to die young.

The film was instrumental in establishing the “hood drama” subgenre in American filmmaking, for better or worse. A host of films throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (*Juice*, *Menace II Society*, *New Jack City*, *Dead Presidents*, etc.) followed in the footsteps of and employed many of the motifs established by Singleton.

Singleton's following films were even less successful. *Higher Learning* (1995), an ensemble film featuring Omar Epps, Kristy Swanson and Michael Rapaport, as well as appearances again by Ice Cube and Fishburne, has moments of social insight and demonstrates sensitivity toward the plight of its characters, a group of students at a fictional university rife with social tensions.

Rapaport's character, the socially awkward and isolated Remy, is bullied and ostracized by his black classmates and unable to fit in with any particular social group. Certain scenes are convincing, including those of Remy gradually being taken in by neo-Nazi skinheads who promise him they “take care of their own.”

Though the racial tensions at the fictional Columbus University seem overwrought (how is it possible for a fascist skinhead gang to exist so easily on the grounds of a liberal university with a large minority population?), one does get a sense of the process that brings about such warped social views. To the director's credit, *Higher Learning* seems to take the position that all forms of racial separatism are harmful.

Unfortunately, moments or sequences with this level of insight and nuance were few and far between in Singleton's films and became increasingly rare as his career proceeded.

His *Rosewood* (1997) was based on a race riot that occurred in rural northern Florida in 1923. White residents from the town of Sumner, reacting to what proved to be a false report that a black man beat and raped a white woman, burned the predominantly black community of Rosewood and murdered several of its citizens—the exact number is unknown. One of the black residents, in self-defense, shot and killed two or more of the white attackers.

The racist atrocity went unpunished at a time when lynchings in Florida

were common and leading politicians in the state openly advocated white supremacy. In 1922, an editor of the *Gainesville Daily Sun*, published 50 miles from Rosewood, admitted to being a member of the Ku Klux Klan and praised the organization.

Such an event thoroughly deserves artistic treatment and exposure. The Jim Crow system of racial segregation and the horrific crimes committed to maintain it form part of the brutal history of class rule in America. Racism was officially encouraged and sponsored in the South to divide the black and white poor, divert attention from the extreme levels of exploitation and poverty, and reinforce the one-party dictatorship of the Democratic Party. Moreover, in the aftermath of the first world war and the Russian Revolution, the ruling class in America organized the first Red Scare and promoted anti-immigrant hysteria. It was a time of tremendous economic dislocation and social tension.

Singleton is simply out of his depth, however, when he tries to deal with complex social and historical questions.

The racist mob in *Rosewood* is treated as an organic, almost inevitable expression of the latent suspicions, insecurities and attitudes of the white population that bubble to the surface more or less arbitrarily in 1923. The unstated proposition of the film is that such attitudes still fester, only waiting to resurface.

Singleton played fast and loose with historical fact, presumably for the purpose of “inspiring” his audience. Centrally, he created a fictional “Mr. Mann” (Ving Rhames), a returning World War I African-American veteran, who encourages Rosewood’s black residents to defend themselves and wields pistols himself. The *New York Times* review observed that the film portrayed life in Rosewood before the riot as belonging to “an idyllic past in which black families are intact, loving and prosperous” and described Mann as “a black superhero who changes the course of history when he escapes the noose, takes on the mob with double-barreled ferocity and saves many women and children from death.”

Singleton explained his attitude toward the events and toward history: “I had a very deep—I wouldn’t call it fear—but a deep contempt for the South because I felt that so much of the horror and evil that black people have faced in this country is rooted here. ... So in some ways this is my way of dealing with the whole thing,” he told the *Times*. The results are unsatisfying.

Inventing myths or legends to encourage racial pride, instead of examining the concrete, painful course of events and drawing out their essential truth, does not help anyone, either.

Despite its serious subject matter, *Rosewood*, unhappily, is a turn away from a serious study of history in the direction of “wishful,” postmodernist thinking and the cheap resolution of difficult contradictions, a step in the direction of what was to come along a decade and a half later in the form of far more retrograde works such as Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained*.

From this point of view, the subsequent shift in Singleton’s filmmaking toward big-budget Hollywood action films—in other words, *unabashed* fantasy films—is not so remarkable or unpredictable. Included in that series of films are the 2000 remake of the 1971 blaxploitation film *Shaft* (starring Samuel Jackson, Christian Bale and Jeffrey Wright); the forgettable 2003 sequel (*2 Fast 2 Furious*) to 2001’s equally forgettable *Fast and the Furious*; and *Four Brothers* (2005) with Mark Wahlberg, characterized, in the words of one critic, by “ultra-violent, vigilante-glorifying action.”

During this period, Singleton also produced and funded certain interesting works, including 2005’s *Hustle & Flow*, starring Terrence Howard as a Memphis pimp seeking to leave the profession to pursue music. The film is notable for its seriousness in depicting its semi-lumpen characters who somehow are not entirely morally destroyed by their circumstances. Sadly, however, the film turns out to be fairly narrow and

conventional in its promotion of the American Dream and the pursuit of “success.”

Singleton’s final years were concentrated in television writing, directing and production. He wrote, directed and produced material for the FX series *Snowfall*, about the cocaine trade in 1980s Los Angeles, during its 2017 season. He also directed episodes of *Empire* (in 2015), *American Crime Story* (in 2016), *Rebel* (in 2017) and *Billions* (also 2017).

Speaking of the transformation of Singleton and others, from independent filmmaking to studio extravaganzas, the WSWS wrote in 2015 that “the economics of [corporate Hollywood tend] to herd a certain category of artists in the direction of the blockbusters.”

These artists “often have vaguely oppositional or ‘left’ views, but nothing that would stand in the way of making wise and seemingly inescapable career choices.” Concluding, we stated these artists are “[l]argely cut off and insulated from broad layers of the population, from its hardships and seething anger,” and their “lack of definite social and historical views renders them vulnerable to the siren song of these vast and lucrative productions.”

In the case of Singleton, whose political views embraced a form of identity politics and black nationalism perfectly suitable to the Democratic Party milieu to which he belonged, this transformation was less dramatic than in the case of a number of others, although his trajectory followed the same general path.

Fundamentally, the limited and then declining quality of Singleton’s work was bound up with the mostly stagnant political and cultural period within which he came of age and worked, marked by the degeneration of the Civil Rights movement, the suppression of the class struggle by the trade unions and the rise of financial parasitism, deindustrialization and a wealthy layer of the upper middle class. The latter was increasingly self-absorbed and focused on its own personality and identity, unconcerned with the plight of the population as a whole.

At his best, Singleton’s work shows warmth and concern for his film’s struggling but dignified characters, particularly at a time when the supposed glory of the free market and corporate wealth were proclaimed to be all that mattered. In particular, his earlier work deserves viewing.

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