

**THE POPULARISATION
OF INTERRACIAL TEEN
ROMANCE IN
CONTEMPORARY
HOLLYWOOD CINEMA.
SAVE THE LAST DANCE
(THOMAS CARTER, 2001)**

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In the first years of the present decade US theatres premiered several features which focused on the formation and progressive evolution of mixed race couples. One of them —*Save The Last Dance*— places an interracial relationship at the very centre of the its narrative, this time transferring the complexities of racism and racial conflict to the world of teenagers, high school and hip hop music. The film has to be located within the threshold those productions made for a crossover black and white audience —with the presence of a white heroine and the reliance on African American thematic. Nevertheless and, perhaps in an effort to encompass an audience as multicultural and wide as possible, *Save The Last Dance* gives in to discriminatory practices which somehow question the film's all-embracing policy and utopian ending. As this paper seeks to demonstrate, this procedure will necessarily affect not only the construction of the interracial couple but also the way blackness is popularised, almost exclusively, for the sake of a white spectator.

In the first years of the 21st century U.S. theatres experienced a noticeable increase in the exhibition of features which dealt with interraciality in manifold ways and under different generic parameters.¹¹⁵ Characters in these films were frequently engaged either in mixed race love/sexual relationships —in films such as *Monster's Ball* (Marc Forster, 2001), *O* (Tim Blake Nelson, 2001), *Die*

¹¹⁵ This proclivity to deal with interraciality and, above all, with interracial love relationships had already started to sprout the previous decade, as confirmed by well-known titles such as *Jungle Fever* (Spike Lee, 1991), *The Bodyguard* (Mick Jackson, 1992), *Lovefield* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1992), *One False Move* (Carl Franklin, 1992), *Made in America* (Richars Benjamin, 1993), *Corrina, Corrina* (Jessie Nelson, 1994) or *Bulworth* (Warren Beatty, 1998), to name a few.

Another Day (Lee Tamahori, 2002), *The Truth About Charlie* (Jonathan Demme, 2002), *Melinda and Melinda* (Woody Allen, 2004), *Guess Who* (Kevin Rodney Sullivan, 2005) or, one of the latest, *Something New* (Sanaa Hamri, 2006)— or in more group-like social alliances, with titles such as *What's Cooking?* (Gurinder Chadha, 2000), *Romeo Must Die* (Andrzej Bartkowiak, 2000), *The Fast and The Furious* (Rob Cohen, 2001, and its sequels), *Everyday People* (Jim McKay, 2004) or *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2004). In none of the above mentioned examples the phantom of miscegenation proved a deterrent, though, as the box office success of many of these films confirmed.¹¹⁶

This renewed proclivity to deal with interraciality on screen has to be discussed in relation —and opposition— to the wider tendency that has traditionally characterised the history of U.S American cinema and Hollywood in particular. From the very beginning, the industry felt uneasy about the possibility of crossing racial boundaries and depicting love between subjects of different races. As Renne C. Romano explains, in the early 1930s regulations concerning film production —such as the Hays Office Code— banned the depiction of romantic relationships between blacks and whites, on the basis that interracial intimacy was believed to be an immoral act, along with incest, abortion, homosexuality, suicide or drug addiction (2003:165). Naturally, the refusal to deal with interraciality had its foundations on the insistence in maintaining the racial *status quo* as clear as possible, and on the general belief that miscegenation was an activity that led to the degeneration and pollution of the “pure” white race (Young 1995:16). In this sense, both hybridity and its “terrible” consequences of degradation for the white dominant group have traditionally repressed every dissent to film the union of black and white characters.

In the year 2001 US theatres premiered several features which focused —either centrally or secondarily— on the formation and progressive evolution of mixed race couples. One of them, *Save The Last Dance*, written by scriptwriters Duane Adler and Cheryl Edwards and directed by African American filmmaker Thomas Carter explored racial conflict by placing an interracial relationship between a black boy and a white girl as the film’s main motif. On the whole, the film appeared to be quite innovative in its approach to interracial issues. Indeed, few features had until then presented a narrative in which the black male

¹¹⁶ See figures and results in <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/>. Because it was an independent production, *Monster's Ball* did not manage such high profits. Nevertheless, the film secured artistic success and worldwide exposure with the Berlin Silver Bear for black Halle Berry as best actress and, above all, in 2002, with Berry’s triumph at the Academy Awards on a night where both she and Denzel Washington won the Oscar for best actor and actress in the leading role categories.

character finally got the white girl.¹¹⁷ The happy ending in *Save* seems however a logical *manoeuvre* when analysing the conditions that influenced and determined the film's development and handling of the (inter)racial conflict and, surely, its more than optimistic resolution. Above all, *Save The Last Dance* seems to respond to the advantageous policy of "guaranteeing the highest profit"; produced and distributed by Paramount Pictures Corporation in association with MTV films, Carter's feature falls fully within the parameters of mainstream Hollywood cinema. In this sense, the film can be placed within a current trend which started some decades ago involving the mainstreaming and "popularisation" of African American audiences and filmmakers for industrial reasons. As Ed Guerrero explains, the near economic collapse of the film industry at the end of the 1960s forced Hollywood to respond to the expectations of African Americans, expectations mainly brought about by the rise of a new political and social black consciousness born from the civil rights movement (1993:69-70). Along with it, the dissatisfaction with the way Hollywood portrayed African Americans in films led the industry to change its *modus operandi* and, as a result, it began to produce black-oriented features that could receive the support and appreciation of blacks while solving the studio's financial problems. Thus, the so-called *Blaxploitation* genre was born, a Hollywood formula that focused on black narratives, performed by a black cast and directed by black filmmakers, who tried to offer a somehow different vision on African Americans.¹¹⁸ It is also worth mentioning that whilst this type of films tried to oppose past degrading portrayals of African Americans, they rarely ever escaped the control of white power and authority, which found new and more subtle forms of devaluing blacks on screen (See Guerrero 1993). These successful low-budget features filled US theatres during the first half of the 1970s, getting black audiences used to their depiction of black life, and, as Guerrero says,

(...) thus preventing the audience exposure to alternative cinema or visions that could possibly challenge Hollywood's domination of the film business (...). The Blaxploitation movies marginalized any effort by independent black filmmakers to portray black life in socially or politically relevant or human terms. (1993:104)

Twenty years later, the new black cinema of the 1990s opened a new field where mainstream productions were confronted with the popularity of the black

¹¹⁷ The general tendency has been to destroy the interracial couple in one way or another, suggesting thus the impossibility for interracial love stories to end happily. Films which have denied this capacity of interracial love to endure include titles such as *Jungle Fever*, *Love Field*, *One False Move* or *The Bodyguard*, among others. In all cases, the couple has been either forcibly or subtly "erased."

¹¹⁸ Some of the most famous and relevant features of the *Blaxploitation* era would include *Shaft* or *Superfly* (both directed by Gordon Parks in 1972).

independent cinema and its anarchic style of experimental cinematic languages and narratives.¹¹⁹ While black independent cinema placed itself outside Hollywood in an effort to resist the abusive images so far presented in popular films (Lott in Neale and Smith 1998:211), mainstream black cinema continued the industry's trend of the 70s and remained within the system, sticking to commercial *formulae* that ensured white audiences' approval, while at the same time still devaluing the image of black people through the use of stereotyped constructions.¹²⁰ As said before, Carter's feature has to be located within this popular current and, particularly, within the threshold of those productions made for a crossover audience: on the one hand, the film becomes reassuring for a racially non-marked spectator who feels comfortable by confirming the preservation of most of the formulaic conventions and the narrative triumph of the white character; on the other, black audiences celebrate the film's reliance on black culture and themes, and the fact that, this time, the roles are inverted, and a white young woman becomes the "outsider" forced to adapt to a black environment.

Perhaps in its effort to encompass an audience as multicultural and, especially, as wide as possible, *Save The Last Dance* gives in to discriminatory practices which somehow question the film's all-embracing policy and utopian ending. As stated before, some of the African American subject matters are extensively displayed in the film. The narrative yet relies again on most racial *clichés* that have traditionally governed the representation of blacks in U.S. American cinema. Black characters chiefly become types which remind the spectator of the old familiar images popularised in the past by U.S. American culture. In particular, the black male protagonist, Derek (Sean Patrick Thomas), is thoroughly designed according to one of the stereotypes Donald Bogle explores in his study of the representation of blacks in U.S. cinema¹²¹ —the good and servile *Tom*. Needless to say, this strategy will necessarily affect the construction and handling of the interracial couple and, certainly, the way blackness is constructed for the sake of a non- racially marked spectator.

¹¹⁹ Although it crystallised in the 1990s, black independent cinema had already started in the previous decade. Since then, the writer, actor and filmmaker Spike Lee has been considered to be the greatest exponent of this new black independent style.

¹²⁰ Take for instance the buffoon-like image of Eddy Murphy in most of the parts he played during the decades of the 1980s and 1990s. Likewise, in the majority of the features produced in the 1990s which present a biracial "buddy" couple, the black character always serves as mere instrument for the white protagonist to become the hero and the figure restoring of the narrative order. E.g. *48 Hrs* (Walter Hill, 1982) or the *Lethal Weapon* series.

¹²¹ Bogle accounts for five different black stereotypes in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks. An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films* (1994).

Save The Last Dance revolves around the story of Sara (Julia Stiles), a middle class white girl who dreams of becoming the leading ballerina of the famous *Julliard* dance company. Her mother's death, though, frustrates Sara's life and dancing illusions. Forced to move to her father's place in South Chicago, she must attend a high school whose students are mainly African American. There, because of her friendship and later love relation with black Derek, she will have to endure the repudiation of all those around them who do not want to see the couple together. This union will nevertheless entail Sara's personal growth and her conquest of the artistic sphere, since she finally manages to enter *Julliard*.

While most narratives have traditionally focused on the complexities of racism as manifested in the realm of adulthood, *Save The Last Dance* transfers such intricacies to a younger province, as is the world of high school, rap music and hip hop aesthetic. The film thus relies on the adolescent "power" to explore and effectively transmit the imprints of clash-culture in US society, in the hope that the film's "teen style" may reach a wider audience open to the harshness of such reality. Moreover, the events that take place between the members of the school community, both black and white, demonstrate that interracial issues do not concern exclusively the scope of love and sexuality—and the constitution of the mixed-race couple—, but are also related to the dynamics of race relations within the sphere of friendship and companionship. As Bailey and Hay explain, the school becomes one of the sites for the socialisation of young people in teen films (in Neale 2002:225), and it is precisely within this atmosphere that the story of *Save* develops.

Most reviews of popular film magazines have defined Carter's feature as a "teenage romance" (Dickinson 2001:57), a "teen drama" (Koehler 2001:37) or even as "a hybrid of every *crappy* teen-dance-romance ever made" (Kennedy 2001:52). The film remains highly conventional and predictable in most of its facets, relying on traditional *formulae* that incorporate and expand the conventions of some of the most popular film genres, namely, the family melodrama and the social racial drama genres, the musical, the dance genre, the romantic comedy and, of course, the *teenpic*. In his study of the genre, Celestino Deleyto explains that these films present U.S. teenagers—usually high school students—as the protagonists of the stories, which tend to centre around the characters' own conflicts, ambitions and relationships, also with respect to the adult world (2003:208). Carter's feature takes advantage of the conventions of a genre in which the presence of a teen cast determines to a large extent its eventual popularity and commercial success.¹²² The importance attached to

¹²² Following its "teen premises," *Save The Last Dance* tries to guarantee itself popularity among young and not so young people by casting fashionable Julia Stiles in the film's female leading role. The actress had recently been defined by *Premiere* as the "teen heroine, the thinking

youth as a potential and deciding factor of a particular film's popularity dates back to the 1950s, when the American film industry targeted teenagers as its new audience. As Thomas Doherty explains, while in the 30s and 40s the whole family represented the main body of film reception, by the mid years of the century different circumstances —such as the rise of television or the studio's financial collapse— brought about a “narrowing” on the viewing focus (2002:2). The decline in movie attendance created, as he calls it, “the financial desperation that led to the emergence of the exploitation *teenpic*” (14). Since then, the industry's reliance on what Dixon calls the “teen appeal” (2000:136) has widely spread through US theatres' screens, and several films have turned into real hits both within and outside the US.¹²³ Along this line, something that nevertheless differentiates *Save The Last Dance* from most of the *teenpics* released in the late 1990s and beginnings of the 2000s, is the presence of a woman as main protagonist. In the latest wave of teen comedies —which includes the *American Pie* series, or titles such as *Dude, Where's My Car?* (Danny Leiner 2000) or *Saving Silverman* (Dennis Dugan 2001)—, the narratives appear mainly centred around the exploits of their male characters; meanwhile, the female ones remain relegated to a secondary position from where they enable the boys' initiation into the realm of sex, while representing as well “an alien mystery that threatens to disrupt the boys' bonds” (Greven 2002:16). Carter's feature favours Sara's point of view instead, her story, and her struggle to make her dream come true, while also giving especial relevance to the bond that the female characters establish among them. The film becomes, in this case, “female-centred”: the main action is initiated by the female protagonist, whereas the male character functions as the means for the “heroine” to achieve her goals. As the ending of the film suggests, the black male character will act as catalyst for the growth and transformation of the white female protagonist.

moviegoer's ingénue” (Agresti 2002: 74). The figure of Stiles has frequently been associated with this naive role she has been playing in films such as *10 Things I Hate About You* (Gil Junger, 1999), *Down To You* (Kris Isacson, 2000), *Hamlet* (Michael Almereyda, 2000) or *O*; as the film titles show, the actress appears to be destined for recent US Shakespeare modernisations. *Save* also relied on the studio system for its public distribution through Paramount Pictures Corporation, in association with MTV Films. The film thus continued the steps of former hits within young people, such as *Flashdance* (Adrian Lyne, 1983) or *Footloose* (Herbert Ross, 1984), which were also distributed by the bizarre combination of rock music and television that is MTV (Doherty 2002:194).

¹²³ Contemporary *teenpic* hits would include well-known titles such as *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973), *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978), *Porky's* (Bob Clark, 1982), *Dirty Dancing* (Emile Ardolino, 1987), or the more recent *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Jim Gillespie, 1997), *American Pie* (Paul Weitz, 1999) and its sequels *American Pie 2* (James B. Rogers, 2001) and *3*, *American Wedding* (Jesse Dylan, 2003), *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997) or *Bring It On* (Peyton Reed, 2001), among many others.

The spectator soon starts to discern the way the film describes Sara's new environment. The girl's transferral—from a middle class white neighbourhood to a predominantly black suburb in the South side of Chicago—is stylistically emphasised by contrasting scenes which portray a bright and sunny home town as opposed to the dark and gloomy atmosphere of the new city. The scenes of Sara's life back in rural Illinois are surrounded by a positive air of pleasant perfection and tranquillity, further accentuated by a distinctive use of *mise-en-scène*: namely, the motif of the mother's flower shop or the profusion of day-time sequences. Conversely, not only does Sara's arrival in the big city occur on a rainy night; likewise, most of the action mainly unfolds in the poorly-lit ground floors of a seedy nightclub of Chicago.¹²⁴ As a result, the protagonist's move to the African American habitat is perceived as a perilous entry into the world of the unknown.

As suggested before, problems of racial hostility and prejudices in contemporary U.S. are this time displaced onto the field of the young. The high school setting reflects the patent divisions between blacks and whites, and constitutes the main source of the protagonist's alienation. *Save* establishes a clear contrast between Sara's all-white former school and the mainly black new one in Chicago. There, her position as outsider is emphasised, becoming virtually the only white student among corridors crowded with black pupils and walls covered with African American celebrities.¹²⁵ Ultimately, Sara's estrangement is reinforced by the sense of insecurity and criminality associated with the black community, as she has to pass the first day of school through one of the many security controls in which—non white—students are seen leaving their guns. The film thus relies on the traditional stereotype of African American men as dangerous individuals and concentrates on the dreary reality of drugs and violence as integral and defining features of the black urban landscape. This same perception is shared by those who apprehend the black community from the outside, and whose only referent stems from popular media portrayals:

Sara's friend: Haven't you seen anyone get shot yet?

Sara: No! I didn't move to Bosnia!

Sara's friend: Jesus, Sara, you're in the ghetto!!

¹²⁴ The gloom of one of the film's main location (the nightclub *Step's*) is further underscored by the accomplishment of 'dark' actions in there; the teenagers infringe the Law by forging their identity cards, in order to obtain the required legal authorization and the 'key' to their fun.

¹²⁵ The film includes another white female character, Diggy (Elisabeth Oas), who also belongs to the group of girls led by Chenille (Kerry Washington). However, this character plays a minor role within the narrative and does not convey a significant meaning with respect to interracial issues.

Following the main conventions of the *teenpic* genre and given the formulaic character of the story, *Save The Last Dance* explores the different phases of the “rite of passage” traditionally associated with the adolescent world. Being integration within the gang a fundamental step for the teenager’s social and individual maturity, Sara soon finds herself with no choice but to enter the new group. The first of the obstacles she has to overcome is, of course, that of the cultural/social barrier. In this regard, the female protagonist’s assimilation of the black world is accomplished through her evolution in two different spheres: friendship, on the one hand, and heterosexual love, on the other.

Sara’s adaptation to the —for her— unfamiliar African American lifestyle is firstly gained through her “incursion” into the female group, headed by Chenille (Kerry Washington), Derek’s sister. Chenille becomes the teaching figure that initiates Sara in her transformation towards a new identity; with her help, Sara learns to speak and dress “black,” something perceived at the same time as a necessary step to reach the guaranteed acceptance into the African American community: Cool outfit? (Sara is hesitant about the appropriateness of her expression). Slammin’. Slammin’ outfit (Chenille’s correction).

Although Sara’s awkward metamorphosis may initially provoke the spectator’s laughter —or at least smile— the truth is that, with passages like these, Carter’s film may remind the audience of the passing strategies that characterised the early cinema of the 1930s, when the “white passing for black” motif was conceived as a common and general practice (See Bogle 1994:3 and Bernardi 2001:xxi). Though not in blackface, Sara also performs a different cultural and racial self, demonstrating once more that identity is a constructed, non-fixed category and not a question of being but rather a matter of becoming (Hall in Hall and Du Gay 1997:4). Likewise, *Save The Last Dance* unveils again its profit-making policy since it conveys the global commercialisation that African American culture has experienced in the last decades. As Watkins claims, since the late 1980s, there has been a widespread appropriation of black youth distinctive cultures which have been furthermore marketed for the industry’s benefit (in Neale 2002:239). Some critics have even talked of a “consumer cannibalism” and consumption of the “Other” black lifestyle, which is at the same time denied and de-contextualised by the dominant white supremacy (hooks 1992:31). In any case, Carter’s feature seems committed to reflecting the new contemporary trend by incorporating the black “subculture” style into a mainstream white product. Hence, the filmmaker becomes likelier to gain the approval and identification of both racial cultures and, especially, of a multicultural audience which is

after all what ultimately constitutes the real engine in popular cinema. African American music and dance thus become one of the main thematic ingredients of the film. Bearing in mind the film's ending, it seems evident that Sara's eventual triumph as a classical ballerina depends to a great extent on her mastery of some of the popular black styles. Indeed, Sara's last audition for the *Julliard* company makes it clear the necessity of hip hop, funky and rap music as the exciting ingredient that her tedious dancing technique lacks.

If Chenille had been Sara's initiator into the African American lifestyle, Derek continues his sister's task by teaching the female white character everything about the "real" hip hop spirit. The film reflects the sort of meanings hip hop music entails within the African American community as experienced by Derek. As he claims, "hip hop is more than a dance. It's more like an attitude." What Sara ascertains from Derek's wisdom is related indeed to actual patterns of behaviour that contribute to the reinforcement of the "black power" policy associated to African Americans since the 1960s. Derek instructs his pupil in walking and sitting down, as he explains to Sara, "like you were a nasty bitch." At first sight, the narrative strengthens the constructed image of black women as whores. Nevertheless, and in this very context, such expression appears rather detached from negative connotations and becomes instead empowering and reassuring of the "black attitude" that rap music and dance conveys. The hip hop motif also points towards the socialising component that it reveals, since it appears to be an essential bond of union and contact among the black community. Moreover, the film refers to the sexual dimension of such music, and reflects how dancing becomes an intimate art of seduction between man and woman. The love relationship born between Sara and Derek will indeed derive from the passion both characters feel towards music and dance, and from the inherent sexual power that African American music appears to transmit.

At first sight, the couple constituted by Derek and Sara appears to be appealing for both racial groups. On the one hand, the African American audience realises that, quite unexpectedly, the mixed-race couple is constructed in such a way that the presence of the black partner is reflected in quite positive terms. As a matter of fact, *Save* departs from the mythical vision that regarded black men as rapists, especially when issues of interracial sex were concerned (hooks 1990:58). Derek appears respectful towards Sara, and negative images are in this sense avoided. To a great extent, the black male protagonist very much resembles some of those black images which were popularised during the 1960s and which responded to Hollywood's

effort to furnish African American audiences with a more positive portrayal of black characters. In *Save The Last Dance*, Derek re-emerges as the new “Ebony Saint” type. This was the label attached to African American actor Sydney Poitier in the late 1960s, as a result of the black community’s dissatisfaction with the kind of roles he had played in films such as *Lillies of the Field* (Ralph Nelson, 1963) and, above all, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*. Poitier was for a considerable period of time a top black box-office star. In order to ensure audience acceptance of this new kind of black male hero, the industry placed him in an integrationist position that made him succeed both critically and commercially (Bogle 1994:195) through roles nevertheless lacking in assertive or realistic traits. As a consequence, he could not escape the fierce criticism of those who saw in him the embodiment, as film historian and critic Thomas Cripps observed, of “sterile paragons of virtue completely devoid of mature characterisation or of any political or social reality” (in Guerrero 1993:72). Since then, Hollywood cinema has shown a tendency to continue featuring black characters “who only want to put their special powers at the service of attractive white people” (Gabbard 2004:143).

Although destitute of any magical or supernatural force, the black protagonist of *Save* functions as well as a fundamental aid in the accomplishment of the female white character’s goals. With a character like Derek on screen, the film confirms the expectations of a white audience who contemplates how a young, attractive and promising black man facilitates once more the centrality of the white character. Furthermore, Sara does not fall in love with *any* African American, but, as Chenille says at one point in the film, with “one of the few decent men we have left after jail, drugs and drive-bys.” Indeed, Derek turns out to be the only male character who, for the whites’ delight, has actual intentions of being integrated within what would be seen as the white dominant social sphere. From the very beginning, he insists on becoming a reputable doctor and leaving his former gang life in the hope of a new promising future.¹²⁶ This is precisely the way in which *Save* reifies the image of the servile and hearty *Tom* character—an image that has been so popular since the birth of US cinema. As opposed to the other black male characters, likewise constructed from one-dimensional stereotyped parameters—e.g. the coon Snookie (Vince Green) and the wretched buck Malakai (Fredo Starr)—, Derek finds larger room for narrative expansion in accordance to his position as co-

¹²⁶Derek’s image as the ideal black hero is highly overdone: he will not become just a doctor, but an affectionate pediatrician.

protagonist of the film. Nevertheless, the *clichéd* formulae that justify his narrative presence back up the old structures of power between blacks and whites, again legitimating feelings of superiority on the part of those who have always held racial advantages.

The nature of Derek and Sara's relationship responds to a great extent to the expectations of mainstream spectators, through the formulaic motif of the heroine's falling in love and her conquest of the romantic sphere, so fundamental for the adolescent world. The narrative actually promotes a rather positive view of their union, while pointing as well at the utopian possibility that the races may live happily together. The soundtrack of the scene where the protagonists kiss each other, whose lyrics refer to "seeing someone's true colors," reinforces this idea. The relationship is surrounded by a general feeling of entertainment and healthy enjoyment, a feeling that both characters share the moment they start dancing. Hence, the film turns to the conventions of both the romantic comedy and the *teenpic*; in the latter, diversion constitutes a shared feeling among the different films. As Robin Wood describes it, "a certain generalised sense of energy, a sense of "having fun" which Hawks always claimed as the basis of his filmmaking" (2003:311). "Playing together" represents in romantic comedy another basic step for the future formation of the couple, an ingredient that marks the "specialness" of the couple from the very beginning (Neale 1990:165). Accordingly, Carter's film seems to believe in the possibility of interracial romance, and in the potential fluidity between racial frontiers, as it provides the protagonists with a common ground on which to base their love: music.

This initially favourable perception of the couple is nevertheless contravened at those moments where Derek and Sara get physically close to each other. Issues of sexuality are, as in most films depicting a mixed race relationship, again absent or deceitful. *Save* seems to suggest that, when it comes to interracial terms, sex loses all its power as a source of energy among teenagers. The narrative does portray the intimate preliminaries of kisses and caresses between the couple, but never reaches its end, and the interracial sexual encounter is only subtly suggested. *Save* even tackles the fake component of the protagonists' relation, as they perform their love in front of an "underground" audience.¹²⁷ In this sense, while the film may be considered to be rather progressive in its presentation of an interracial couple that finally triumphs, it nevertheless remains restrictive and cautious when issues of miscegenation come into play. The film's refusal to portray the union in sexually explicit terms reveals its commitment to the long Hollywood tradition of erasing interracial sex from the screen.

¹²⁷ Aware of people's repulse of their relationship, Derek and Sara have fun by devoting each other kisses and caresses just for the sake of arousing the anger in one of the white passengers.

The heterosexual couple is likewise perceived as a menace to the film's black community and to the sense of brotherhood that permeates it. The stability of the couple depends to a great extent on its "victory" over the conflict it maintains with the other subplot incorporated in the narrative; namely, the social problem of black gang violence and ghetto lifestyle addressed by the film through its reliance on the conventions of the so-called "hood films" of the 1990s. The genre, referred to as well as "Neo-Blaxploitation" (Benshoff *et al.* 2004:91), "New Gangsters Movies" (Ross 1996:71) or "Ghettocentric Cinema" (Lott in Neale and Smith 1998:219), explores the experiences of black youth in poor ghetto communities and, as Watkins explains, "the perilous relationship between young, disadvantaged black males and an economically impoverished and segregated ghetto landscape" (in Neale 2002:243).¹²⁸ The genre must be understood as part of the mainstream production, since it was born in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a continuation of the *Blaxploitation* formula of the 70s and, again, out of the industry's necessity to attract wider audiences that increased its profit. Hollywood thus responded to the social reality of the time, which at the same time provided it with the appropriate thematic context, namely,

the post-industrial ghetto in the American popular and political imagination, a reconfigured popular culture economy and youth marketplace, and the commercial vitality of hip-hop culture in general and the popularisation of gansta rap music specifically (Watkins in Neale 2002:237).

Thomas Carter realises the economic advantages of the "hood" culture and incorporates in his 2001 film the most conventional clichés and *formulae* of the genre. The character of Malakai thus typifies the gangster friend figure and the use of gratuitous violence in an alienating black world. As opposed to the promising future of his best friend, he appears condemned to a certain death on the streets of Chicago. In this sense, *Save* is also very much about class struggle and black youngsters' survival within a repressive and confining black urban space. As Malakai reproaches Derek: "I'm not you, Derek! I can't do nothing but what I'm doing! I can't go to Georgetown with a 10.0 GPA! All I have is my respect."

Malakai's figure introduces as well the issue of black male bonding as the essential motto in "hood" life. Karen Ross describes the meaning of black male friendship in film:

Friendship (and love) for each other is the only nourishing force which appears open to black men in these films, since women are routinely abused, both physically and verbally and rarely emerge as credible or creditable

¹²⁸ *New Jack City* (Mario Van Peebles, 1990), *Juice* (Ernest R. Dickerson, 1991), *Boyz N The Hood* (John Singleton, 1991), *Straight Out Of Brooklyn* (Matty Rich, 1991) and *Menace II Society* (Albert and Allen Hughes, 1993) are considered to be central titles within the genre.

characters. Women are constantly described as whores and bitches (...) and usually ineffectual as wives, mothers and partners (1996:74).¹²⁹

The film constantly shows this male disregard towards women through most of the conversations held among male characters. Ultimately, the main objections are targeted towards Sara—take for instance expressions such as “too busy snowflaking,” “white women don’t bring nothing but trouble” or “that happens when a white girl goes to your head”—, while black women are quite respected and even favoured. As Malakai once makes clear to Sara: “you’ll never look as good as she (Nikki) does with him. That’s oil. You’re milk. Ain’t no point trying to mix.” At this point, the narrative shows the effects not only of sexism but also of the inverted racism that dominates the film’s black group. The aversion towards the white female character does not exclusively stem from the male group; likewise, the girls—particularly Nikki (Bianca Lawson) and even Sara’s best friend, Chenille—show their complaints about a widespread and colonising white influence:

Sara: I don’t even know how all this started!

Nikki: It’s about you. White girls like you. Creeping up, taking our men. Your world ain’t enough, you gotta conquer ours, too.¹³⁰

The characters of Nikki and Malakai thus represent the obstacles that the main characters have to overcome—or rather eliminate—in order to survive in such a hostile atmosphere. In the same way, they stand for the conventional “wrong partner” types hampering the development and eventual success of the couple. In this sense, the film makes use of the conventions of both racial and romantic melodrama, thus satisfying once more the audience’s popular expectations. Accordingly, the ending of *Save The Last Dance* is as formulaic as anyone can expect: although at first Derek seems to follow the maxim “blood’s thicker than blondes,” and accompanies Malakai in the gang confrontation, he finally decides to abandon violence and a likely death and go instead after Sara to support her in the decisive audition for the *Julliard* ballet company. Thanks to Derek’s encouraging words, the film implies, Sara successfully performs the last of her numbers and is eventually selected by the company.

¹²⁹ Notice as well that in most films that deal with teenage characters, friendship remains stronger within the male group than within the female one. As Jon Lewis explains, “while boys bond in protracted rites of male solidarity, girls assemble cliques whose sole purpose is to exclude other girls” (1992: 64). This somehow would explain the racist insults between the two (supposedly friend) black girls, Chenille and Nikki, at *Step*’s.

¹³⁰ Nikki’s reaction is realistic. As Manatu explains, “as a result of large numbers of successful black men marrying white women, many black women blame white women for “stealing” their best man” (2003: 100). This is something Chenille also complained about before.

As here argued, the narrative of *Save* is directly oriented towards the final triumph of the white female character. Sara's success is not limited to the scope of classical ballet but, perhaps more importantly, the happy ending also contemplates her "victory" within the African American community, as the final dancing at *Step's* demonstrates. Sara's accomplished integration within the black community had been metaphorically anticipated by the same fusing characteristics of her last audition; indeed, the blending of classical and rap music, together with the performance of some hip hop steps, is what is perceived by the jury as the deciding factor that makes possible Sara's expected access.

As suggested at the beginning of this article, this is a film which apparently seems to break with the practice of condemning interracial love stories to an imperative end/separation; in *Save The Last Dance*, it is implied that the lovers remain together after all, as the couple appears dancing at the centre of the dance floor surrounded by the rest of the community. But what are the real reasons why, in this case, the interracial relationship goes ahead, the narrative suggesting that the protagonists will live happily together? The fact that the characters are teenagers together with the genre conventions used by the film in order to convey their love seem to constitute the actual circumstances why this is so. The world of adulthood —and the individual's entry into the sphere of maturity—, in relation to the conventions of romantic comedy, entails and somehow demands a series of social "compromises" and responsibilities, as is marriage. Had the characters been adult, the threat of a more solid union between two races and, above all, its more direct consequences —the begetting of a biracial child— would have been present. Teenagers, on the contrary, are initially devoid of social responsibilities and adolescent unions become in this way, harmless: the "risk" of miscegenation still appears very distant in time. On another level, and although proposing at many points a positive and utopian perspective on interracial matters, Carter's film finally compromises too much; the scales are completely tipped on the "white side" after Derek's determination to reject male friendship and remain with Sara instead. *Save* turns to be one more instance of a black character serving a white one. The white alliance is perceived as the best of all: whilst the black male bonding would have entailed Derek's fall into hell, the heterosexual union with Sara ensures that the black protagonist's dream of becoming a doctor will come true. Thus, the "domestication" and de-contextualisation of the black character enables the restoration of the narrative order, while maintaining racial structures as they have always been: one of top of the other.

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