

The Epistemology of Race and Black American *Film Noir*: Spike Lee's *Summer of Sam* as Lynching Parable

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Although the “new black film wave” inaugurated in the mid-1980s by directors such as Spike Lee has received a good deal of critical attention, one overlooked aspect is its on-going cycle of Black American *films noirs*.¹ These works have transformed *film noir* itself by redirecting its conventions and themes to explore what might be called an epistemology of race. While some academic work has focused on this cycle’s development among African American scholars (most notably, the work of Manthia Diawara) and mainstream *noir* studies, much of its significance has been misunderstood.² In particular, few critics seem interested in examining why filmmakers as diverse as Spike Lee, Carl Franklin, Bill Duke, Charles Burnett, and Kasi Lemmons have found *noir* conventions useful in portraying the struggles African Americans often face as they confront the injustices of everyday racialized life. How is it possible for Black *film noir* to bring an explicit social criticism of race into the Hollywood mainstream? What are the conditions of knowledge that provide a foundation for an on-going Black *noir* investigation of race?

Two points should be made clear from the outset. First, I argue that these films offer audiences new ways of seeing and understanding the role of race in contemporary American society. Second, I suggest that while

Black *noirs* utilize elements found in such classic American *noir* films as *Double Indemnity*, *Out of the Past*, and *The Naked City*, they do so in ways that transform *noir* tropes through the category of race. Both traditions often address issues of power, confinement, determinism, and marginalization. Both also typically feature powerful or inadequately understood forces that threaten their protagonists, who are inexorably drawn toward fates that seem inescapable. In recent Black American films, however, *noir* elements attribute confinement, marginalization, and determinism to social injustice, thereby ascribing a racialized dimension to the trappings of power. This is a striking difference from standard American *film noir*. While some classical *noirs* aimed at criticizing problems of class,³ a socially critical strain of this tradition that could have been directed toward problems of race was neglected during its heyday as well as its revival beginning in the “New Hollywood” of the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁴

In contrast, the current cycle of Black *noir* has not only reinvigorated and reconfigured the workings of *film noir* into critical investigative mechanisms focused on race, but also provides illuminating analogues to arguments advanced by recent theorists of race working in philosophy, including Charles Mills, David Theo Goldberg, and Lewis Gordon. Similar to Black filmmakers’ *noir* intervention into the Hollywood mainstream, critical examinations of race in philosophy have moved to center stage and created a new subfield that is beginning to reshape the discipline. Moreover, studies in the cognitive aspects of race aim directly at laying bare what Mills has identified as philosophy’s “epistemology of ignorance” regarding race by providing insights into an alternative system of knowing that profoundly challenges dominant forms of cognition.⁵ Epistemologists of race have offered philosophy access to that overlapping yet distinct parallel universe of human experience where racist oppression radically alters everyday life, even as this oppression is overlooked by those professing to describe, theorize, and explain “universal” human experience. Ultimately, these critics argue, the revelation of this parallel universe of experience—a crucial example of which is ordinary Black life—demands a re-conceptualization and re-direction of what we think of as moral and political philosophy, an assessment that concurs with the perspectives offered by Black *film noir*.

By juxtaposing one such film with elements deriving from critical examinations of race in philosophy, I hope to bring into focus some of the details involved in addressing the questions posed above and illuminate aspects of white presumptions of privilege, particularly their distorting effects on moral thinking. Here I offer three main points, which I will illustrate by means of Spike Lee’s *Summer of Sam* (1999). First, I sketch some relevant epistemological conclusions advanced by recent

philosophical theorists of race. Second, I describe some of the ways in which Black filmmakers have reinvigorated *noir* conventions by using them to challenge typical American conceptions of race and their underlying moral epistemologies. Third, through this redeployment of *noir* conventions, I argue that African American filmmakers have provided critical evidence for claims advanced by work in the epistemology of race. Because I have written elsewhere about several earlier works in this film cycle,⁶ and because *Summer of Sam* represents an advance in the overall critique put forward by Black *noir*, I concentrate here on the more recent example Lee's film provides. Based on its analysis, I then offer some concluding remarks about epistemology, race, and Black American *film noir*.

Recent Philosophical Theories of Race

Let me begin by offering an analogy that I think illustrates the long-standing relation between race and philosophy. Black detective fiction writer Chester Himes wrote in 1976 in the second volume of his autobiography, *My Life of Absurdity*, that problems of race had created such an existential absurdity in his life that he often could not tell the difference between what was real and what was absurd.⁷ Himes's observation about his own life fittingly describes the status of race in modern Western philosophy.⁸ On the one hand, until well into the 1990s race had at best a marginal place in most philosophical discussions, particularly those discussions taking place in the United States. Problems linked to the concept of race were considered to be of peripheral interest—empirical, non-philosophical matters to be discussed after the “real” theoretical disputes had been settled.⁹ On the other hand, since the seventeenth century Western philosophy has profoundly influenced the treatment of non-whites and their status as human beings, even while it outlined and established the bases for “universal” human rights and theories of liberalism. While providing the foundations for these cornerstones of modern Western society, philosophers such as Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, and Kant also established the theoretical underpinnings for modern racism.¹⁰ This contradiction continues to induce dimensions of absurdity and realism into discussions of race in Western philosophy, the examination of which theorists have only recently begun to force onto the discipline.

In contrast to this way of treating racial matters, many contemporary philosophers examining race argue that while Western philosophy's influence on people of color has been profound, that influence has been consistently evaded or obscured. They suggest that modern liberalism has historically and conceptually presupposed the systematic and racialized

oppression of entire groups of human beings from whose domination whites, as the main beneficiaries of modern liberalism, have long benefited and from whose circumstances they continue to benefit. For these thinkers, the everyday realm, as reconfigured through the category of race, emerges as a primary battleground. They argue that, like liberalism, the typical American day-to-day life of whites presupposes systematic and racialized oppression. The everyday life of persons counted as white takes for granted a system of dominance and privilege that has as one of its dimensions the award of full human rights to whites and a lesser schedule of rights to non-whites, a social structure that continues today in multiplicitous forms. Being white, then, has social, political, and moral privileges, a conclusion that should surprise no one. Yet the astonishing consequence raised here is that whiteness also imposes *cognitive* requirements with moral consequences for both whites and non-whites. When looked at institutionally, whiteness amounts to an epistemological stance that affects the ethical.

These theorists contend that one overlooked aspect of race is the way in which it permeates everyday cognitions as well as dominant sensibilities: that is, ordinary ways of thinking, believing, and acting. Mills argues that whites normally operate by means of a structural blindness to their own power and privilege as well as to the consequences of that lack of vision. "An idealized consensus of cognitive norms" informs their beliefs and actions, constituting a system of knowledge that imposes misperceptions, insensitivities, and presumed incapacities regarding persons counted as non-white.¹¹ This epistemological blindness is a *condition* of whiteness in its idealized form, in the sense that to think and perceive from that subject position presupposes that one possesses such a cognitive incapacity. Whiteness, considered as a set of institutionalized power relations, rather than as an aspect of biology or heredity, has profoundly disturbing epistemological as well as moral consequences.¹²

Thomas E. Hill, Jr. and Bernard Boxill concur with Mills's assessment of this cognitive blindness on the part of whites, even while working from a strict Kantian perspective.¹³ They argue that knowing the right thing to do is often difficult for whites because knowing the relevant moral facts is deeply problematic for those comfortably ensconced in power. Hill and Boxill elaborate that "confident, complacent, well-positioned white people will not only find it difficult to do what they know to be right; they will find it still more difficult to know what is right, even when they sincerely claim that they are trying to do so."¹⁴ This difficulty arises because whites may be easily deceived by their own advantage into believing that it accrues to all, and unable to see with adequate vividness cases of racial injustice because these seem so far removed from white experience.¹⁵ Such

obstacles place whites at a cognitive disadvantage as a price of their privilege. They are prone to self-deception regarding racial injustice because they lack an ability to grasp the morally relevant facts, and their advantages blind them to the absence of such privileges for others. As a result, their capacity to act morally becomes seriously impaired.

From a phenomenological perspective Lewis Gordon argues similarly that ordinary white perceptions of everyday matters involving African Americans mask those perceptions' proper status as systematic forms of misanthropy, abnormality, social pathology, and injustice.¹⁶ Rather than seeing what in the situation of fellow whites would be deemed unfair, iniquitous, or even perverse, one sees merely the ordinary life of blacks, normalized by its presumed pervasiveness as well as by waves of alleged explanation aimed at justification. In other words, it is those people's living conditions, their nature, social relations, economic circumstances, family structures, or overall potential for intelligence that are to blame. Gordon notes that such "ordinary" perceptions also truncate whites' social world to the point of moral retardation, for under such epistemological regimes human beings live lives cut off from complete actualization of their humanity, which renders them incapable of appreciating its full possibility. Whites, as he puts it, possess a "misanthropic consciousness" that lacks significant aspects of the social world.¹⁷ Whole dimensions of human interaction, lifestyles, sensitivity, and even language become off-limits as a condition of acceptance for whiteness. Thus one aspect of being white is that it requires a cognitive, moral, and social amputation of one's full potential for humanity, the results of which have fundamental effects for one's self and for others.

David Theo Goldberg explores related points in the field by examining how some racist exclusions may be justified by rational means. While many, perhaps most, forms of racism are indeed not rational, others turn out to be consistent with accepted criteria of rationality such as providing sufficient evidence, accepting reasonable doubt, being open to criticism and revision, and the like. Those forms of racist belief that pass standards of rationality become cognitively "normalized" by means of endorsement from the highest standard of human behavior. It becomes "perfectly reasonable," in other words, for whites to assume in everyday life that new, expensive clothing and valuable possessions operate as markers of criminal accomplishment if possessed by African Americans; that skin color operates as a sign of criminal guilt or at minimum suspicion; and that neighborhood locations operate as indicators of good or bad morals.¹⁸

More recently, Jody David Armour has augmented Goldberg's argument by considering how some versions of Bayesianism may support

“rational discrimination” by whites. If one uses certain forms of probabilistic reasoning to weigh statistics of violent felony convictions, overall criminality, and the like, then believing that Blacks possess a far higher potential to be violent assailants of one’s person or property passes the test of rationality.¹⁹ While Armour goes on to argue that such reasoning fails to meet a higher standard of reason,²⁰ the point I wish to underscore here is that some forms of racism have at least a *prima facie* claim to being rational, which Armour points out has been accepted by U.S. courts as well as some philosophers (e.g., Michael Levin).²¹ This revelation would seem an unfortunate discovery to almost anyone working in moral and political philosophy.

The shared conclusion of these theorists working with the epistemology of race is that instances of unfairness and injustice in Black life often escape detection by whites due to a kind of cognitive blinkering. The task of the theorist, then, is to bring attention to the epistemological misperception of everyday details, so that critics may reformulate and redirect white moral vision in ways that acknowledge the unjust and unfair circumstances constituting many people’s everyday lives, rather than letting what I will here call the “white gaze” determine dominant moral perception and sweep over such details obliviously.²² Philosophical theorists of race have worked to reveal to their readers what Mills has called a “racial fantasyland” that undergirds white dominance and privilege. This fantasyland constitutes the epistemology of ignorance that prevents whites from perceiving the reality and effects of their own beliefs concerning racial difference.²³ Such cognitive blindness requires fundamental revision, for it rests on what Mills calls a “consensual hallucination,” an invented delusional world where white moral consciousness is filtered by norms of social cognition that derive from an unconscious sense of dominance in the world.²⁴ The necessity of redirecting and reformulating this flawed white moral vision is forcefully brought home by many Black American *noir*-influenced films.

Film Noir’s Subversive Possibilities

From its inception in the 1940s, classical American *film noir’s* convergence of diverse techniques and themes has offered ways of persuading audiences to see protagonists cross lines of bourgeois acceptability, transgress established laws, and infringe on underlying moral codes. Outlaw and marginalized groups have regularly counted *noir* characters among their members and have just as often drawn others into their orbit. Moreover, the doomed or damaged fates of many *noir* protagonists

reflected a pessimism and dissatisfaction felt by audience members against prevailing established orders. While *noir* films typically cause audiences to sympathize with moral transgression as well as underworld economies, here I want to suggest a slightly different but related point, namely, that these standard themes and conventions of classical *film noir* may be directed toward critical examinations of knowledge.²⁵ For instance, a convention such as confinement to circumstances from which there seems no escape may function in *film noir* to compel characters and/or audience members to seek knowledge that might profoundly alter their systems of belief, perception, or action. Such conventions open up possibilities for *noir* narratives to serve as cognitive searches aimed at epistemological transformation.

These possibilities arise frequently in classical *noir* as well as its post-1960s descendants, generally known as neo-*noir*. *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947) depicts its main character trying to uncover details that will allow him to escape his sordid past. *Try and Get Me* (Cy Enfield, 1950) explicitly condemns (non-racialized) lynching.²⁶ *In A Lonely Place* (Nicholas Ray, 1950) examines the latent violence that typically informs American masculinity. *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) reveals a dispiriting corruption that thrives in the way most municipalities are run. *Noir* narratives often become cognitive investigations that aim at some sort of epistemological transformation, particularly of their audiences. Some are explicitly so (e.g., *Try and Get Me*), while others may be more subtle (e.g., *In A Lonely Place*, *Chinatown*), but many offer up to their viewers knowledge and perspectives meant to change how they think, perceive, and act.

In spite of this well-established subversive capacity, *noir* functions in both radical and conservative manners. Usually, it is noticeably duller as right-wing critique: who, after all, admires *film noir* for such works as *I Was a Communist for the FBI* (Gordon Douglas, 1951)? Like many critics, I find *noir's* radical affinities more attractive, and African American filmmakers have likewise been drawn to these elements. In one of the best articles written describing this appropriation, Manthia Diawara explains how the new black film wave often redeploys *film noir* tropes to depict social injustice against African Americans and the need for its rectification.²⁷ Rather than highlighting moral or legal transgression, black and darkness tropes are used to foreground the oppression forced on African Americans by white society. For example, *noir* conventions may serve to show how institutions of white authority impose criminality and law-breaking on African Americans by granting them virtually no other viable choices. By depicting Black life through *noir* conventions, Diawara argues that many films by African Americans deconstruct white racism

and its intricacies by exposing the ways in which forces of white privilege fracture and distort African American existence, thereby making possible improved reflections by audience members regarding the immorality and injustice of these dominant institutions.²⁸ Unlike typical Marxist or feminist forms of *noir* criticism, Diawara focuses mainly on thematic elements in *film noir* narrative to support his analyses, rather than offering a form of criticism based more squarely on *noir*'s style.²⁹ This is a strategy I follow in my own analysis, to which I now turn.³⁰

Summer of Sam as Lynching Parable

Spike Lee's recent film offers a subtle and oblique form of racial analysis, for on the surface the narrative is not about race at all. Instead, it focuses on how suspicion and fear of difference itself cause violent tensions in an Italian-American neighborhood in New York City during the hot summer of 1977. Using *noir* techniques that at times tacitly quote from Jules Dassin's classic *The Naked City* (1948), particularly in the framing story narrated by Jimmy Breslin which parallels producer Mark Hellinger's voice-over narration of the older film, Lee depicts how several young men who grew up together begin to suspect an old friend of the serial murders taking place in their neighborhood after he returns from living in Manhattan with ideas and an outward appearance that are entirely foreign to them. Afraid of the unfamiliar and unable to assimilate their friend into the simple-minded stereotypes with which they were raised, these young men reflexively treat him with suspicion, distance themselves from him, and presume his guilt based on their own fear of those not like them.

However, Lee introduces the element of race into the film by thematizing this suspicion of difference through *noir* narrative, thereby transforming this Bronx tale into a parable for racial lynching. With scenes of white neighborhood gangs roving the streets with baseball bats looking to beat up anyone who might not "belong" there and individuals who look different being refused service at diners while police officials collude with vigilantism and mob hysteria, the allusions to the history of Black lynchings are striking. For example, most of the characters repeatedly criticize the anomalous appearance adopted by their old friend Ritchie (Adrien Brody). With his hair spiked and his body adorned with the regalia of punk rock, Ritchie embodies a look they cannot assimilate. At first, they try to fit him into ready-made outsider categories by calling him a "freak," a "vampire," and a "fag." Later they tell him that he is no longer welcome in the neighborhood because the way he looks upsets them.

Eventually they suspect him of being a Satanic cult member because his otherness is so foreign that they can find no other place for it. They put him at the top of the list of suspects who they believe might be the killer roaming the streets of New York City that hot summer, the Son of Sam, even though the narrative makes clear that this suspicion has no basis in fact. Tellingly, Spike Lee portrays Ritchie as the most sensitive, caring, and thoughtful of these young men. Ritchie openly objects to their violent actions against those weaker or different from them, sees people for who they are instead of by means of stereotypical categories, and thoughtfully listens to his friends' problems rather than using them as the basis for ridicule and advantage.

Ignoring all that, however, the other young men browbeat Ritchie's best friend Vinnie (John Leguizamo) into betrayal with taunts such as "killer, fag, pimp, punk rocker ... queer, pervert, degenerate, whatever the fuck it is. I mean—c'mon: who wants something like that around here anyway?" *Summer of Sam* is thus transformed thematically into a *film noir* about racial lynching. Lee uses themes of confinement and determinism as in other *noirs*: fate slowly closes in on Ritchie as his progressive marginalization culminates in being beaten mercilessly, and his best friend Vinnie inexorably succumbs to the dictates of the dominant "white gaze" by giving in to the idea of seeing Ritchie as someone punishable for being different.

Characters in the narrative also specifically reference the theme of lynching. The first time Vinnie betrays Ritchie and leads a group of vigilantes to one of his hangouts, Ritchie responds, "So you [brought] a fucking lynch mob down here to string me up." In this instance Ritchie manages to escape, due to the ineptitude of his would-be assailants, but out of frustration they severely beat another punk who crosses their path and provocatively claims to be a Boston Red Sox fan. Near the end of the film, the news reporter John Jefferies (Spike Lee) describes the crowd awaiting the arrival of the person who was later proved to be the real Son of Sam, David Berkowitz. Jefferies refers to this roiling mass outside the police station as a "potential lynch mob" full of "rage and vengeance." While he goes on to describe them as "going crazy" at Berkowitz's arrival and giving in to "pandemonium ... hysteria ... [and] chaos," we hear the crowd screaming "Kill him" and "Lynch him" while on the soundtrack The Who's ironic "Won't Get Fooled Again" comments on the intercut screen images of not just one but two hysterical groups. One is the crowd outside the police station, nearly out of control and demanding the immediate death and burning of someone who has yet to be tried for the actions of which he stands accused. The other is the neighborhood gang that, ignorant of the events being televised, has actually spun out of control as it finally catches up with Ritchie and beats him senseless.

The film also subtly emphasizes how this mentality embraces virtually all whites: men and women, adults and children, gays and heterosexuals—even junkies—so long as they are able to gain acceptance by means of some semblance of normalcy, a normalcy that is subtly raced as white. Moreover, the film returns again and again to the matter of Ritchie’s punked-out hair as the marker of anomaly and how upsetting it is to those who desire the sort of hair “normal people” (i.e., those raced as whites) possess. Characters repeatedly comment on how they cannot get used to Ritchie’s spiked (and later Mohawked) hair, as if his choice of haircut were a clear offense against them. This rejection of non-standard hair uncomfortably alludes to dominant white rejections of Black hair on alleged aesthetic grounds and perhaps to its erstwhile souvenir value as evidence of lynchings.³¹ Acceptable-looking hair must be the sort that fits within the parameters of whiteness, which Ritchie’s punked-out hair, like typical Black hair, does not do.

When the television reporter played by Spike Lee, John Jefferies, goes to the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood to obtain what he describes as “a darker perspective” on these serial murders, one of his respondents tells him: “I am going to give you your darker perspective. The darker perspective is: ... I thank God that it is a *white* man who kills all of those *white* people, because if it were a *black* man who kills all of those *white* people, there would be the biggest race riot right here in New York City.” This observation reveals one way in which the city’s community is riven with racial tensions that could easily result in mob hysteria and lynching. Such commentary by Black New York City residents enlists them as a Greek chorus whose remarks illuminate the panic and paranoia felt by whites in the city, who perhaps for the first time begin to acquire a sense of the fear and stress that is inextricably linked to the normal lives of persons of color in America. The threat of violence is latent, but palpable; and any individual could be the potential carrier of it. There is simply no way to tell. In this fashion *Summer of Sam* further alludes to historical Black sentiments regarding lynching and everyday life.

In a brief discussion of racial lynching in his book *Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism*, Lewis Gordon observes that “the victim is anonymous except insofar as he can be identified as a member of a hated group.”³² Consistent with this idea, characters in *Summer of Sam* repeatedly tell Ritchie, “I don’t know you,” even though they have known him all their lives as close friends. Instead they place him in the category of some misunderstood, marginalized outsider group (cult member, punk rocker, degenerate), in an effort to distance themselves from him. In this manner they remove Ritchie’s individuality, making him the anonymous member of a hated group. As Gordon points out, the *racial* dimension of this human



In Spike Lee's *Summer of Sam* (1999), Ritchie (Adrien Brody, far right) becomes victimized by the prejudiced actions of his former friends due to his newly acquired traits of "otherness" and their newfound paranoia concerning a serial killer on the loose. Other actors in this shot include, from left to right: Al Palagonia, Ken Garito, John Leguizamo, and Michael Rispoli. (Photofest)

diminution reveals itself through the ways in which the power relations of such symbolic persecutions mimic those of white privilege. The anonymous outsider moves into the subject position of being Black, while the enraged mob as an instrument of retribution becomes empowered as white.³³ The punishment becomes a punitive action by those with power, who act as if they were white by imposing it on an individual for being different, who is thereby treated as if he/she were Black.

Bernard Boxill extends these observations by noting that "the symbolic meaning of a lynching is that its victims, and those like them to whom it is meant as a warning, have no rights." Conversely, its perpetrators "admit no wrong." Rather, they hold "themselves up for approval and [declare] their righteousness." As such, "the effectiveness of lynching as an insult lies in the special vehemence and perverse eloquence with which it makes its point."³⁴ Persecution of this sort is not meant merely to harm the individual involved, but is meant as a warning to *all* those in the group of which the individual is a member who would even hint at challenging the status quo: This will happen to you, too, if you so much as dare to question your station in how things are. Like some members of the black

community, punks like Ritchie openly challenge how power relations stand, doing so in ways that range from emulating contrary hairstyles, clothes, bodily adornments, and music to violating notions of respectability and propriety (in other words, that range from aesthetics to politics). Ritchie's persecution, then, parallels that of blacks who respond similarly to the power relations confining them in the sense that he is punished symbolically for the same reason—that is, for daring to think, act, and look differently. When looked at symbolically, then, the persecution of one individual stands for the persecution of all in his or her marginalized group, for it is meant as a warning—a threat—by those in power against challenges of any sort against them.

Another element the film raises is the issue of how vigilantism and lynching have symbiotically co-existed with white officialdom. Early in the narrative, two police detectives appeal to the neighborhood capo, Don Luigi (Ben Gazzara), to help them catch the serial killer. With officialdom's blessing he forms roving gangs armed with baseball bats to “protect” the neighborhood from anyone who does not belong there. Charles Mills has interpreted the collusion between white officialdom and vigilantism as part of the physically violent aspect of coercion that enforces artificial racial differentiation.³⁵ Lynching operates as “massively disproportionate retaliatory violence” that is intended to force non-whites to remain obediently in their subaltern positions by stressing the violence's difference in scale and ferocity.³⁶ As a technically illegal activity, lynching is something that may occur—particularly with its intended force—only through the collusion and at times encouragement of those in power. Lynching also helps to enforce the cognitive dimensions of racial differentiation, which include for non-whites learning to see one's self as undeserving of the privileges enjoyed by whites through providing a strong physical incentive to believe that the dominant position's formulations are accurate.³⁷ Mills likens this second form of coercion, which is ideological as well as cognitive, to the intellectual equivalent of “seasoning,” or slave breaking. He quotes Frederick Douglass as describing this process of darkening one's moral and mental vision and annihilating one's power of reason, a necessary process if non-whites are to see themselves as appropriately subordinated by this sort of racial differentiation.³⁸ Such cognitive enforcement of differential rights is greatly facilitated by white officialdom's open and willful blindness to violent acts such as lynchings.

A related aspect of the film's racially inflected exploration of themes surrounding lynching is its calling to viewer attention a disproportionate horror at the death of whites, as opposed to those of non-whites. Sadly, as Mills would note, this disproportionality is a consequence of the differential valuation of human beings that is built into our social epistemology.

Conclusion

If we view *Summer of Sam* in conjunction with studies in the epistemology of race, its analysis brings out the ways in which its viewers—particularly its white viewers—need to attend to aspects of race in ordinary life. As such, this film joins forces with other Black American *noirs*, among them *One False Move* (Carl Franklin, 1992), *Deep Cover* (Bill Duke, 1992), and *Devil In a Blue Dress* (Carl Franklin, 1995), in exposing how a distorted social epistemology undergirds institutional forms of white supremacy.³⁹ Such attempts to broaden critiques of race as one finds in *Summer of Sam* show a conscious effort on Lee's part to come to terms with the problem of difference in general, very much in line with the efforts of philosophers who theorize race.⁴⁰ *Summer of Sam* bespeaks an effort to achieve a broader understanding of the human condition, rather than one that rests content in a parochial perspective. What Lee recognizes here is that similarities exist between the problems of many different marginalized groups. Those goals and efforts of such groups aimed at greater fairness and liberation may then be shared. This broadened perspective is essential if problems of race (and for that matter difference in general) are to be fully understood and eradicated. Although *Summer of Sam* focuses predominantly on whites, it highlights their racial attitudes by analyzing an underlying fear of difference in order to criticize and change it.

Juxtaposing Black American *film noir* with recent discussions of race in philosophy, then, can highlight elements depicting undetected aspects of daily life that betray a raced sense of knowledge and cognition. Particularly when observed through the lens of certain philosophical texts, Black *noirs* can help viewers, especially white viewers, see what the relevant moral facts are regarding racial injustice, to use Hill and Boxill's phrasing.⁴¹ These films can also fulfill at least some of the conditions that Adrian M. S. Piper describes as the cognitively transformative possibilities possessed by contemporary works of art. For sympathetic viewers and under the proper conditions (e.g., having read recent discussions of philosophy and race), Black *noirs* have the capacity to encourage viewers to confront their own racist beliefs.⁴² These films might assist in convincing whites to learn to listen or observe sympathetically those who may be somehow subordinate to them, so that whites might acquire a better sense of moral relevance. Laurence Thomas has explained this sympathetic listening more elaborately than do Hill and Boxill as a sort of "moral deference," a humility in the face of radically different and challenging moral experience.⁴³ Such humility is essential if whites are to know, understand, and act morally regarding racial injustice.

Taken together, these filmic and philosophical criticisms enhance each other's claims by confirming and amplifying separate diagnoses of the many cognitive problems surrounding race—especially anti-Black racism—in America. They also offer hopes of possible resolution by making clear the complexity of the difficulties on which they focus. Through such juxtapositions we might better grasp the relations between epistemology, race, and doing the right thing.

Notes

1. See, for example, Ed Guerrero, "A Circus of Dreams and Lies: The Black Film Wave at Middle Age," in *The New American Cinema*, ed. Jon Lewis (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 328–352, and "Black Violence as Cinema: From Cheap Thrills to Historical Agonies," in *Violence and American Cinema*, ed. J. David Slocum (New York: Routledge, 2001), 211–225.

2. See Manthia Diawara, "Noir by Noirs: Toward a New Realism in Black Cinema," in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), 261–278; James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 246–253; Richard Martin, *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls: The Legacy of Film Noir in Contemporary American Cinema* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1999), 137–142; Foster Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1999), 289–304; Jans B. Wager, *Dangerous Dames: Women and Representation in the Weimar Street Film and Film Noir* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999), 124–127. African American appropriation of *film noir* has also received popular recognition. See, for example, B. Ruby Rich, "Dumb Lugs and Femmes Fatales," *Sight and Sound* 5:11 (November, 1995), 6–10; and Ed Guerrero, Review of *Devil In A Blue Dress*, *Cineaste* XXII:1 (1996), 38, 40–41. Still, I would argue that its significance has been largely misunderstood, particularly its transformation of *noir*. For an especially striking example, see Hirsch.

3. See, for example, *Force of Evil* (Abraham Polonsky, 1948), *Raw Deal* (Anthony Mann, 1948), and *The Damned Don't Cry* (Vincent Sherman, 1950).

4. While generally I am in agreement with Eric Lott's claim in "The Whiteness of *Film Noir*" (*American Literary History* 9 [1997], 542–566), that classical American *film noir* is marked by grievous racist exclusions, the problem is slightly more complicated that his generalization allows—something of which he shows some awareness in the last few pages of his essay. Lott is right to argue that overall classical *noir* is "the refuge of whiteness" (546), for its themes and obsessions are almost exclusively those of white culture. Yet there are exceptions that Lott dismisses too quickly, the most noteworthy of which are late-comers in the classical *noir* period, Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958) and Robert Wise's *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959). I take up these and other complications relating to *film noir* and race in my *Black Philosophy and the Epistemology of Film Noir* (Westview Press, forthcoming).

5. See, for example, Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 17–19.

6. See my “Black on White: *Film Noir* and the Epistemology of Race in Recent African American Cinema,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 31 (2000), 82–116.

7. Chester Himes, *My Life of Absurdity: the Later Years* (New York: Paragon House, 1976).

8. And, for that matter, film. But that is a story that has already been well told. See, for example, Thomas Cripps’ *Slow Fade to Black: the Negro in American Film, 1900–1942* (Oxford University Press, 1977) and *Making Movies Black: the Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (Oxford University Press, 1993); as well as essays in *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U. S. Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996); and *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993).

9. See, for example, John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

10. See, for example, Robert Bernasconi, “Who Invented the Concept of Race? Kant’s Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race,” in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 11–36; Richard H. Popkin, “Eighteenth Century Racism,” in *The Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 508–515; Mills, *The Racial Contract*; esp. 64–72; Emmanuel C. Eze, “The Color of Reason: the Idea of ‘Race’ in Kant’s Anthropology,” in *Postcolonial African Philosophy*, ed. Emmanuel C. Eze (London: Blackwell, 1997), 103–140; and the essays by these historical figures anthologized in Eze’s (ed.) *Race and the Enlightenment* (London: Blackwell, 1997).

11. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 17–19.

12. *Ibid.*, 126–127.

13. Thomas E. Hill Jr., and Bernard Boxill, “Kant and Race,” in *Race and Racism*, ed. Bernard Boxill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 448–471.

14. *Ibid.*, 470.

15. *Ibid.*, 469–470.

16. Lewis Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 62–63.

17. Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995), 182–184.

18. David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture* (London: Blackwell, 1993), esp. 144–145.

19. Jody David Armour, *Negrophobia and Reasonable Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 35–46.

20. Armour argues that *acting* on rationally based factual assessments such as Bayesian perspectives may offer would be unreasonable because it would fail to take into consideration other crucial factors, such as “the consequences of error if those factual judgments are mistaken” (*ibid.*, 47). In other words, the cost of potential mistakes is too high for the threshold of *reasonably* acting on such beliefs to be breached. More generally, Armour explains that acting on these seemingly rationally justified racist beliefs ignores the value-laden dimension of reason (*ibid.*, 55–57). The fact that being reasonable requires a balancing of different values, some of which are the costly potential harms that may arise if one is inaccurate about one’s assessments, militate against these discriminatory beliefs being endorsed by reason. Ultimately, he argues, such apparently rational assessments fall back on racial stereotypes for their foundation, rather than sound reasoning, so they may be rationally rejected (*ibid.*, 51–54).

21. See Armour, *Negrophobia*, 1–46. See also Michael Levin, “Responses to Race Differences in Crime,” in *Race and Racism*, ed. Boxill, 145–179.

22. For this term I am mimicking, obviously, Laura Mulvey’s description of what is now commonly called the “male gaze.” See “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16:3 (1975), 6–18.

23. *The Racial Contract*, 18; see also 91–109.

24. *Ibid.*, 18.

25. See, for example, Nino Frank, “The Crime Adventure Story: A New Kind of Detective Film,” and Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton, “Towards a Definition of *Film Noir*,” both in *Perspectives on Film Noir*, ed. and trans. R. Barton Palmer (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996), 21–24 and 59–65 respectively; Carlos Clarens, *Crime Movies* (New York: Norton, 1980), 191–233; Brian Neve, *Film and Politics in America: A Social Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 147–170; and Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (New York: Vintage, 1992), esp. 18–46.

26. Oddly, while this film explicitly condemns lynching, all its characters are white. This is strange because the history of lynching in America would lead one to believe that the lead characters who suffer this fate would be Black (see, for example, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* [Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000]). Yet these roles are played by white actors (Lloyd Bridges and Frank Lovejoy) and no references to race are made in the narrative.

27. See *Shades of Noir*, ed. Copjec, 261–278.

28. *Ibid.*, 263.

29. *Ibid.*, 262.

30. I want to note that the use of *noir* themes such as crime and transgression as “metaphors of resistance” to the values of the dominant white culture is something that philosopher Tommy Lott has pinpointed as a key element in the success of rap and hip-hop music (Tommy L. Lott, *The Invention of Race*, [London: Blackwell, 1999], 111–126; the phrase is from 121). By noting that the dominant media images of Black men are those of criminals and the ways in which hip-hop and rap work to invalidate those images by taking them on and recoding them for their own purposes, Lott explains that these musical forms convey different meanings to their intended audiences from those conveyed to individuals in power (120–1). One result of this re-coding is a transformation of what knowledge is: “to be *politically* astute” rather than in possession of empirical details (122). Another is the value of defiance in the face of oppressive circumstances for the purpose of reinforcing a sense of self-respect, without necessarily endorsing the form that defiance takes (*ibid.*). Much like rappers who have exploited stereotypical gangster and thug life images to critique white power, makers of Black *film noir* have used and re-coded the components of this form of film to expose and criticize white ways of knowing and acting. For a fuller explanation of how recent black films have borrowed from rap and hip-hop, see S. Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

31. Regarding the former point, see Mark C. Taylor, “Malcolm’s Conk and Danto’s Colors; or, Four Logical Petitions Concerning Race, Beauty, and Aesthetics,” in *Beauty Matters*, ed. Peg Zeglin Brand (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 57–64, and Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 61–62.

32. Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism*, 114–5.

33. *Ibid.*, 115.

34. Bernard Boxill, *Blacks and Social Justice*, Revised Edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992), 139.
35. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 81–87.
36. *Ibid.*, 86.
37. *Ibid.*, 87–88.
38. *Ibid.*, 88.
39. See my “Black on White: *Film Noir* and the Epistemology of Race in Recent African American Cinema,” esp. 90–106.
40. Perhaps, too, it is a response on Lee’s part to critics such as bell hooks and Douglas Kellner, who have argued that one of the weaknesses of earlier Lee productions was that his critiques of race were too confined to single-issue or identity politics, and that he needed to incorporate a politics of otherness. See bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), esp. 183–184; and Douglas Kellner, “Aesthetics, Ethics, and Politics in the Films of Spike Lee,” in *Spike Lee’s “Do the Right Thing,”* ed. Mark A. Reid (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 73–106, esp. 98–99.
41. Hill and Boxill, “Kant and Race,” 470.
42. See Adrian M. S. Piper, “Two Kinds of Discrimination,” in *Race and Racism*, ed. Boxill, esp. 231–237.
43. See Laurence Thomas, “Moral Deference,” *The Philosophical Forum* 24 (1992–93), 233–250.