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**“From Nihilistic Implosion to Creative Explosion”:
the Representation of the South Bronx from *The
Warriors* to *The Get Down*.**

Supervisor

Ch. Prof.ssa Francesca Bisutti

Co-Supervisor

Ch. Prof.ssa Daniela Ciani Forza

Graduand

Demetrio Antolini

Matriculation Number: 850770

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**“FROM NIHILISTIC IMPLOSION TO CREATIVE EXPLOSION”:
THE REPRESENTATION OF THE SOUTH BRONX FROM *THE
WARRIORS* TO *THE GET DOWN*.**



Children fly a kite in a street bordered with fire-gutted buildings in the South Bronx section of New York City in 1977.

Source: https://www.buzzfeed.com/gabrielsanchez/what-a-strange-world-nyc-was-in-the-1970s?utm_term=.aiDRYK8Mr#.xqZ1DLEAS

«This ain't New York! This is The Bronx» (*Beat Street*, 1984)

«Where do you come from?» “Manhattan” “Do you want me to take you back there? You know, this is The Bronx. [...] Nothing is worse than this hellhole» (*1990: The Bronx Warriors*, 1982)

«Mylene: “I wanna live there, Zeke. It's so beautiful.”

Ezekiel: “The Bronx is better. We got everything they got in Manhattan. Plus, we can sit here and enjoy the beautiful view of them. But they got nothing to look at but the fucked-up, burnt-out, totally not beautiful view of us.”» (*The Get Down* – Part 1, Episode 6, 2016)

«Beyond these South Bronx streets, people might look at her and think she existed outside history and chronology. But inside the strew of rubble she was a natural sight, she and the robed monks. What figures could be so timely, costumed for rats and plague?

Brussels is surreal. Milan is surreal. This is the only real. The Bronx is real»

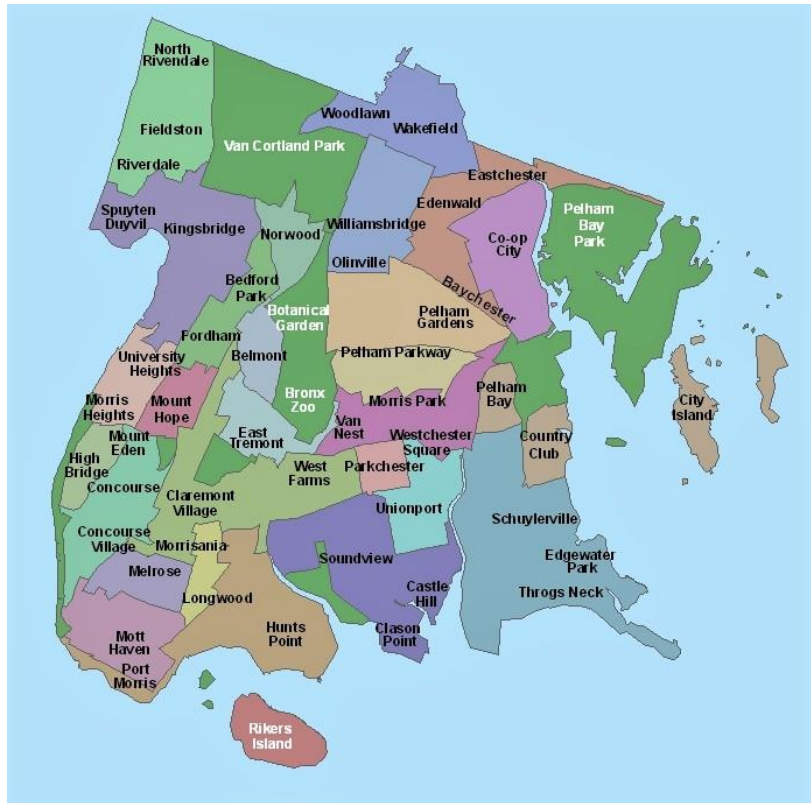
(*The Angel Esmeralda* – Don DeLillo)

INTRODUCTION

In 1971, Cornell Benjamin, most commonly known in the street under the pseudonym of “Black Benji”, was reportedly beaten to death while he was trying to negotiate with members of a rival gang that were spreading panic in the Bronx’s section of Hunts Point. In 1982, *The Message*, a song by Grandmaster Flash & The Furious Five came out, later becoming the first rap song added to the National Recording Registry¹ by the Library of Congress and the best hip-hop song in history according to the magazine *Rolling Stone*. What do these two events have in common? The place, that is, the South Bronx. Black Benji was an influential member of the Ghetto Brothers, a youth gang based in the South Bronx born at the intersection between the 162th and Westchester in the Hunt’s Point section. Grandmaster Flash was a D.J. originally from Barbados, but living in Fox Street in the South Bronx since early age. According to Fernando Ferrer, President of the Borough in office from 1987 to 2001, “[t]he term ‘the South Bronx’ did not exist before the 60’s. It was mostly an invention, a shorthand way to describe physically decaying neighborhoods, rising crime and rising poverty” (NYTimes.com). In trying to help to geographically locate the area, a common definition includes the neighborhoods of Mott Haven, Melrose, Morrisania, and Hunts Point–Crotona Park East, even if the extension of the area has changed (and increased) throughout the years together with its own definition and with its growing bad reputation.

In fact, as chronicled by Eward Lewine, within the official maps the South Bronx still does not exist and according to the residents he interviewed, “no one could agree on exactly where the South Bronx is. But they all said that wherever it is, it has a bad reputation” (The Bronx Beat).

¹ The National Recording Registry contains a list of songs or sound recording in general that are “are culturally, historically, or aesthetically important, and/or inform or reflect life in the United States” To have more information see: <https://www.loc.gov/programs/national-recording-preservation-board/about-this-program>.



The Bronx's neighborhoods

Source: <http://macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/mhcseminar2/>.

Be that as it may, not only has the South Bronx witnessed some of the worst moments in U.S. urban history, but also the birth of a new culture that today is recognized worldwide and that found in the South Bronx its cradle, similarly to what happened with the Delta for blues in early XX century (Campbell, 323). Despite being constantly overshadowed by the shining lights of the richer Manhattan, which was just four miles away, the South Bronx was able to find its own light and place on the map to an extent that hip-hop pioneer, Kool Moe Dee of the Treacherous Three (also appearing in the movie *Beat Street*), once affirmed, “[a]s far as hip-hop, Manhattan was after the Bronx” (ThaFoundation.com). Paradigmatic of the relevance hip-hop culture has achieved nowadays are the words by Ta-Nehisi Coates who, talking about a farewell party hosted at the White House in October 2016 where many guests from the music industry were invited, states: “The victory belonged to hip-hop – an art form

birthed in the burning Bronx and now standing full-grown, at the White House, unbroken and unedited” (TheAtlantic.com).

In September 2016, Barack Obama in his remarks at the Dedication of the National Museum of African American History and Culture stated: “We are large, containing multitudes. Full of contradictions. That's America.” And, in fact, the Bronx expresses this idea of contradictions, decay and renaissance and this concept of multitudes, especially knowing that it is considered to be one of the top-10 largest and most diverse cities in the U.S. (DailyNews.com). The Bronx and the South Bronx in particular, is the mirror of a changing and contradictory America, its conscience, the keeper of its most gratifying beauty and its most tearing deterioration. C.J. Sullivan in his essay *There's Hope for the Bronx* defines the borough, “the harbinger of America’s future” and continues:

From the rise of doo-wop to the ascendancy of hip-hop – from urban destruction to urban renewal – from graffiti and youth gangs to uncontrolled rioting, looting, and arson [...], the Bronx was on the cutting edge of America’s economic decline. (78)

For this reason, it is always worth remembering the history of this place; it is symbolic of a contemporary world which tries to struggle, stretched between an intimate and local side and a global and continually changing side.

As a consequence, this dissertation aims to analyze the representation of the South Bronx during its period of maximum agitation, the two decades 1970 and 1980, as it is represented in the movies of the time. An analysis through motion picture films is not casual; first of all, because the South Bronx’s decay was in itself particularly visual and second because, as we will see, the national and international reputation of this neighborhood has been widely shaped by its representation on the big screen. The French architect François Bregnac admitted that in 1990, when he declared: “We knew of the Bronx from the movies – the police movies” (Gonzalez, 129). Particularly telling is also the fact that two of the movies

set in the Bronx in the early 80's were directed by an Italian film director, Enzo G. Castellari, showing how that place had become an universal emblem of "urban nightmare". This narration through visual images appears even more relevant nowadays, since the online American channel Netflix released in August 2016 a tv-series, *The Get Down* by Baz Luhrmann (director of *Moulin Rouge!* and *The Great Gatsby* among the others), with the ambitious purpose of telling the history of that important period. *The Get Down* came out 40 years after ABC broadcaster Howard Cosell allegedly made the famous announcement, "There it is, ladies and gentlemen, the Bronx is burning" (NYTimes.com), which put that neighborhood on the national map for the years to come along with President Carter's visit to Charlotte Street in October 1977² and it shows how the history of the South Bronx is still today a relevant topic for a broad audience, worthy of a considerable investment³.

This work takes into account the movies set in the South Bronx (or which have an explicit relation with it) produced in the late 70's and in the early 80's comparing them with *The Get Down*, the latest product set there, that benefits from a more detached point of view from the events which happened in that period. What emerges is that we can recognize two different ways to represent the South Bronx on the big screen that go in two opposite directions and that fail to highlight the continuity in what scholar and writer Jeff Chang described in his seminal book *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-hop Generation* as an evolution from "nihilistic implosion to creative explosion" (Chang, 64) and also fail to give a holistic portrait of the neighborhood. *The Get Down*, instead, also thanks to its detached point of view and to the wide possibilities offered by contemporary tv series, proves able to convey the

² A full report of Carter's visit to the South Bronx is available here:

<http://www.nytimes.com/1977/10/06/archives/carter-takes-sobering-trip-to-south-bronx-carter-finds-hope-amid.html>.

³ Ironically, Howard Cosell's tape revealed that he actually never said that phrase during the live broadcasting. Nonetheless, that catchy expression, probably elaborated by New Yorkers themselves, has become legendary, a sort of mythical picture of that period.

To have more information see: <http://nypost.com/2010/05/16/why-the-bronx-burned/>.

whole atmosphere of the period, maintaining a balance between two representations at antipodes through its mixture of reality and fiction. Worth mentioning is that I decided to use the above mentioned quote by Chang in the title of my dissertation, first of all because I think that it conveys perfectly the essence of the South Bronx during those years and second, because it is also a way to pay homage to a scholar I truly look up to.

The dissertation is organized in the following manner. The first chapter offers a historical presentation of the Bronx and the South Bronx in particular, from the end of World War II to the notorious years when the Bronx was known as “America’s Third World” (Sullivan, 77). The aim is to give the the necessary base and tools to understand the comparisons in the field of film studies that will take place in the following chapters. The second chapter continues on the traced path of history and sociology, focusing on an overview and explanation of gangs in post-war New York City. This chapter is useful to clarify an intricate topic like the one of gangs. As the already mentioned scholar Jeff Chang says, the history of gangs in the Bronx has still to be written since sources are mainly oral. Hence, an attempt to unravel that complex gangland can be useful. Throughout this chapter I will also rely on documentaries such as 1979 *80 Blocks from Tiffany's* by Gary Weis, 1993 *Flyin’ Cut Sleeves* by Henry Chalfant and the most recent *Rubble Kings* (2015) by Shan Nicholson, because they collect useful interviews with former gang members. So, these first two chapters have a historical and documentative approach and rely on a research on secondary sources, deeply centred in the field of urban studies. The third chapter, instead, shifts from metropolitan history to the area of film studies and focuses on a study of the contradictions of the South Bronx as represented by the dichotomic movies of the period. From here on out, I am going to use also primary sources such as movies and fiction books. On one side this dissertation takes into account movies that helped to increase the reputation of the South Bronx as a “war zone” legitimizing a narrative based on war vocabulary, like *The Warriors* of 1979 by Walter

Hill, *Fort Apache*, *The Bronx* of 1981 (in which you can hear the notorious line “You’d be better off in Beirut”⁴) and *1990: The Bronx Warriors* of 1983 by Enzo G. Castellari. On the other side, it examines a series of movies set in the South Bronx and belonging to the so called “breaksploitation” period like *Beat Street* of 1984 by Stan Lathan and its precursor, *Wild Style* of 1983 by Charlie Ahearn, that exalted the creative force arising from the neighborhood. Then, the fourth chapter is devoted to an analysis in depth of the tv series *The Get Down*, also assessing its value in the overall narrative about the South Bronx.

As Rachel Lee Rubin and Jeffrey Melnick states in their book *Immigration and American Popular Culture*,

[n]ew cultures are often described with spatial metaphors — “underground,” “avant garde,” and so on. This reminds us that even if official commentators could not see it, the South Bronx was teeming with cultural life in the 1970s. (209)

That is, in fact, what emerges, after all, from my dissertation. Filmic representations of the South Bronx of the 70’s and 80’s did not fully highlight the interconnection between implosion and explosion, that is, between ruins and treasure. The neighborhood in itself with its contradictions was the perfect place for the development of hip-hop culture; Shadrach Kabango, the narrator of documentary series on hip-hop called *Hip-Hop Evolution*, defines hip-hop as, “[coming] from everything [...]. [It] is also politics and technology because these are the forces that pushed it to become a culture”. What happened with the above mentioned movies was that on one hand they did not recognize that a cultural change was coming and on the other hand they did not acknowledge that this new wave of creativity was an evolution of the turmoil that was going on just a few years before. *The Get Down*, instead, with its mixing of reality and myth, found the way to represent the neighborhood in its lights and shadows.

⁴ At the time, Lebanon was in the middle of a bloody civil war.

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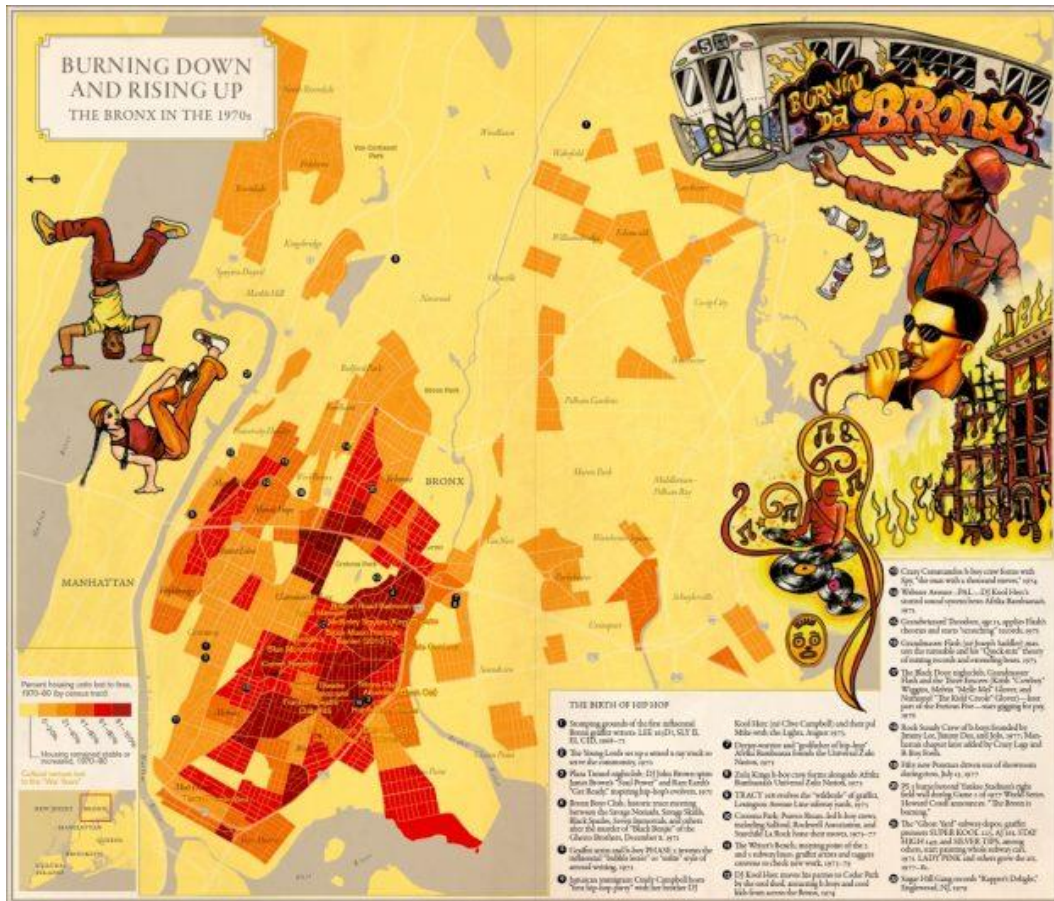
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CHAPTER 1

THE EVOLUTION OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD

FROM “WONDER BOROUGH” TO “AMERICA’S THIRD WORLD”



Burning Down and Rising Up: The Bronx in the 1970's. From Rebecca Solnit and Joshua Jelly Schapiro's *Nonstop Metropolis: A New York City Atlas*. Published by UC Press. Cartography by Molly Roy. Design by Lia Tjandra.

This chapter aims to present the Bronx and its evolution from a historical point of view. It is a necessary step in order to understand the analysis of this borough in its scenic representation that will take place in the following chapters and that constitutes the heart of my dissertation. In particular, this first chapter takes into consideration the peculiar case of the South Bronx, a “neighborhood within the neighborhood”, to show its relevance in my

narration. The evolution of the South Bronx as the most notorious area of the borough went hand in hand with its spatial expansion, to the extent that Jill Jonnes described the process as

a small, one-mile-square neighborhood in the far southeast corner of Mott Haven [that] by 1980 the city of New York and the media had redefined the boundaries of the infamous South Bronx to include everything south of Fordham Road, or twenty square miles. (8)

As a consequence, the evolution of the public perception of the South Bronx has influenced the overall notoriety of the Bronx as well as its fluctuating boundaries. Hence, the idea behind this chapter is to underline all the factors that led the southernmost part of this borough to decline and that paradoxically helped to define its territorial extension, at least in the public's perception, to the extent that a South Bronx resident, once interviewed by Edward Lewine, declared: "First of all, look around, it don't look dilapidated. That's what I associate with the South Bronx" (The Bronx Beat).

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Before introducing the topic, two preliminary clarifications are needed in the interest of facilitating the comprehension of the text. First of all, a linguistic explanation; I will use the word "borough" to refer to the Bronx and the word "neighborhood" to refer to the South Bronx. Second, as I have already said, my dissertation takes into account a study of the South Bronx area, because that is the specific area that made the whole Bronx famous (or infamous) in the first place. It is precisely because of this reason, however, that sometimes even reliable sources I found during my research tend to overlap the two terms, Bronx and South Bronx, in what can be seen as a sort of synecdoche. In a partial defence of that, however, it must be said that this area has not been clearly delimited for a long time. The bad reputation of the southernmost part of the borough grew so much during the second half of the XX century that in popular narrative the two denominations tended (and still tend) to coincide. Throughout

this chapter I will try to avoid this kind of terminological confusion as much as I can in order to help the reader to develop a clear picture of the context in which first an initial collapse and then a renaissance of human values took place.

The Bronx is one of the five neighborhoods, commonly referred as “boroughs”, that make up the urban pattern of New York City. The others are: Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island. Ironically, despite the fact that nowadays “The Bronx” is a term used to describe everything that is imaginarily “south”, like the peripheries and the bad areas, it is New York City’s northernmost neighborhood. It is separated from Manhattan Island by the Harlem River and divided by the Bronx River from north to south. It is also the only one of the New York City’s five boroughs to be part of the mainland. Its population, according to the most recent census data available (2010) is around 1,385,108. In particular, during the time-scale I am examining in my dissertation, residents were 1,471,701 in 1970 and 1,168,972 in 1980 (Gonzalez, 110), going from the maximum peak to the lowest point of the last 60 years. This same period saw a fall of white residents in the borough that shifted from 1,080,000 in 1970 to 550,000 in 1980 (Sullivan, 78). The so called “white flight” contributed to hasten (and was influenced by) racial and spatial divisions in the neighborhood that had been increasing since 1960, when the southernmost part of the borough went from being two-thirds white in 1950 to be two-third Hispanic in 1960 (Gonzalez, 1). What is relevant here, is to understand why the Bronx changed so much during the XX century and, above all, why this urban change has been a fundamental element in shaping the Bronx reputation and in creating a place so full of contradictions, a notorious symbol of contemporary urban decay recognized and established worldwide, to the extent that, for example, rough areas like Quarto Oggiaro in Milan, Torvecchia in Rome and San Giovanni in Naples used to be commonly referred to as “The Bronx”. Due to the limited space of this dissertation, I am going to skip the early history of the Bronx in order to focus more on its history since the end of World War II. In

doing so, the intention is to leave more space for an analysis in depth of the different factors that led to the awful situation which culminated in the 80's, the worst years ever for the borough (D'Orsogna, 109). The specific choice of the post-war period as a starting point is due to the fact that it was basically the moment when the borough started to decline thanks to policy and economic choices of those years. In fact, in the decades preceding World War II, let's say from 1880 to 1930, the borough was even regarded as one of the "fastest growing areas in the world" and the "Wonder Borough" of homes, parks and universities (Gonzalez, 5). Many artists such as Edgar Allan Poe and Mark Twain lived there in the XIX and early XX century. It might sound ironic, given what I have said about the Bronx so far, that Poe moved there because it was a quiet place immersed in green to spend days with his sick wife (Smithsonian.com). The movies of the first decades of the XX century, especially those made during the "roaring twenties", reflected this positive idea of the Bronx as a desirable place to live. An example is the silent film *The Jazz Singer* by Alan Crosland (1927), in which the protagonist, a young man of Jewish origins, before moving to Broadway, says to his mother:

If I'm a success in this show, well, we're gonna move from here. Oh yes, we're gonna move up in the Bronx. A lot of nice green grass up there, and a whole lot of people you know.

1.2 THE SOUTH BRONX AFTER WORLD WAR II: SYMPTOMS OF AN ANNOUNCED DISASTER

From an urban and architectural point of view, the modern evolution of the borough was deeply marked by the figure of Robert Moses, which deserves particular attention because he monopolized New York City public life from 1910 to 1970 (D'Orsogna, 87). Extremely powerful, charismatic as well as controversial, Moses shaped the city according to his ideas, leaving an eternal imprint on New York City and a polarizing and disputed legacy after his death in 1981. According to Robert A. Caro, who wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning

biography of the city planner in 1974⁵ and who, to be honest, proved to be very critical of Moses' behavior:

He had used the power of money to undermine the democratic processes of the largest city in the world, to plan and build its parks, bridges, highways and housing projects on the basis of his whim alone.

This idea is also reinforced by his longtime antagonist, the urban theorist Jane Jacobs, in her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* of 1961 and by the more recent Jill Jonnes' book *South Bronx Rising: The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of an American City* of 2002, where she reports the words written on a bench in the South Bronx, "Moses thinks he's God" (Jonnes, 119) to convey the widespread idea, at least among Bronxites, of being faced with a man with no scruples and high self-esteem. It is also true, on the other side, that attempts to re-evaluate his works have been made throughout the years. Worth mentioning is Paul Golberger's article published on *The New Yorker* in 2007, in which he says:

Moses's surgery, while radical, may just possibly have saved New York. For every Moses project that ruined a neighborhood, as the Cross-Bronx Expressway did East Tremont, there are others, like the vast pool and play center in Astoria Park, Queens, or the Hamilton Fish Pool, on the Lower East Side, that became anchors of their neighborhoods and now are designated landmarks. [...] It may not have been democratic, or even right. Still, somebody has to look at the big picture and make decisions for the greater good. Moses's problem was that he couldn't take his eye off the big picture.

Whatever the opinions are, positive, negative or at the halfway between the two, Moses'immense power was undeniable; even if he was not formally elected by anyone, throughout his career as a public servant he held, often simultaneously, different roles such as: N.Y.C. Construction Coordinator, N.Y.C. Park Commissioner, N.Y. State Council of Parks Chair, N.Y.S. Public Works Department Chair and many other roles including the

⁵ In August 26 1974, Moses answered to Caro's biography with a 23-page letter having the title "Comment on a New Yorker Profile and Biography by Robert Moses".

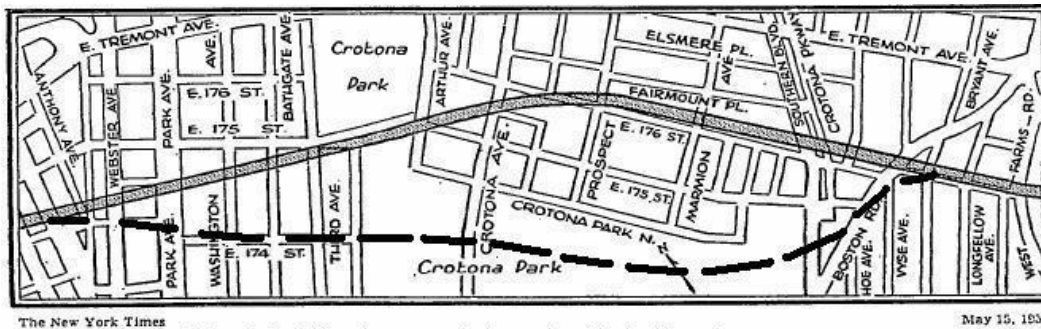
To read the full letter: <http://www.bridgeandtunnelclub.com/detritus/moses/response.htm>.

commissioner in various public authorities like, for example, the T.B.T.A. (Triborough Bridges & Tunnel Authority). It is also indisputable that his great influence and the projects he was able to realize, from playgrounds and houses to bridges and highways, had an impact on the Bronx, the South Bronx and the communities living in the neighborhoods that were affected in many ways by the decisions of this public figure and to an extent that is still being evaluated today. The starting point to understand his conduct is knowing that all his actions were driven by the idea that “we live in a motorized civilization” as he says in his answer to Caro’s book (Moses, 6). This meant that his decisions were largely governed by the need to face a growing booming car culture, in a context in which the rationale for urban planners was becoming no longer the people but the car and so he tried to interpret that change in perspective. A massive transformation to the Bronx occurred with the creation of the Cross-Bronx Expressway, an 8.3-mile-long road that completely sliced the borough in two to the extent that the American writer Johnatan Kozol once described the South Bronx area as consisting of four predominantly black and Hispanic community districts “south of the Cross-Bronx Expressway” (Kozol, 289). According to Caro, indeed, “[n]o one had dared lay superhighways through a heavily populated modern city”. As Bronx-born philosopher Marshall Berman stated, it was an “amazingly creative”, but “humanly destructive” project (Rubble Kings). Approved in 1944 by the T.B.T.A., of which Moses was leader from 1934 to 1968, and considered necessary for national defense together with a complex scheme of highways, its construction started in 1948 as part of the interstate highway system and was almost entirely financed by the federal government and the local administration of the state of New York. The route was supposed to go from the Bronx-Whitestone bridge in the east to the George Washington bridge in the west slicing through “a dozen solid, settled, densely populated neighborhoods in the borough’s western portion, destroying blocks of apartment buildings at a time when every apartment was needed” (Gonzalez, 116). By 1955, the first

two sections had been completed, but the final link of the expressway was completed only in 1963 (nycroads.com). The major criticism advanced of this colossal work was that the Cross-Bronx, as it is colloquially referred to, evicted residents and families for each mile of the expressway; from the 1,530 families living in East Tremont to the 750 families evicted from the westernmost segment of the expressway (Freilla, 79; Schwantz, 110), for an estimated total of 5000 families displaced. Benjy Melendez of the Ghetto Brothers, remembers:

Buldings are taken out of commission, hey, gotta go! We're gonna build this highway over here. The Cross-Bronx expressway at one time, that whole area was nothing but houses, beautiful houses. And that's when the things started to go down. The economy, the store owners, everybody just took off. (Rubble Kings)

The debate over “Section 3” of the expressway which had to go through the working-class Jewish neighborhood of East Tremont is particularly revealing of Moses’s personality and of the changes caused to the borough by his massive construction. Scholars today generally agree that an alternative route, less invasive and problematic was possible; diverting the route two block to the south of the original plan, would have saved money and houses. However, according to Caro, Moses, despite the support of the East Tremont Neighborhood Association and the protests of the residents, refused to change his mind about the preset track because he was protecting his friends’ interests in that area, an accusation that, obviously, Moses categorically denied. After all, from whichever perspective Moses works can be analyzed within the overall XX century urban planning theories, the Bronx changed forever after his intervention. The East Tremont’s displacement, however, is just one example of how the construction of the Cross-Bronx transformed the borough and the South Bronx. The expressway accelerated the relocation of middle and upper class families from the South Bronx area to the northern part and to the suburbs, initiating the creation of a new neighborhood mirroring the already mentioned quote by Kazol.



Moses' (solid) and proposed alternative (dashed) routings.

Source: http://web.mit.edu/1.011/www/finalppr/smalpert-Cross-Bronx_paper.pdf

The Cross-Bronx Expressway was only one element contributing to the decay of the area. While the Cross-Bronx was being completed, in 1955, the Mitchell-Lama law (sponsored by Senator MacNeill Mitchell and Assemblyman Alfred Lama) was enacted in order to offer state and municipal assistance to private developers in the form of long-term, low-interest mortgages and real estate tax exemptions (Sweet and Hack, 117-118). The majority of the housing projects under the law, 6 housing cooperatives out of a total of 17, were built in the Bronx. Its most famous example was Co-op City located in the Baychester section, in the northern part of the borough. It was a “city within a city” and became the world’s largest cooperative apartment complex, housing 60,000 people (Jonnes, 274). Built on the ruins of *Freedomland*, an amusement park active approximately from 1960 to 1964, Co-op City was another initiative sponsored by Robert Moses. Launched in 1968, later the same year it had already received ten thousand applications, of which seven thousand were from the Bronx alone (Gratz, 99). According to D’Orsogna (107), this huge residential project was the main cause for the decline of the original apartment buildings in the South Bronx, because, despite a federal program called *Model City Program* launched in 1966 in order to restore crumbling urban areas, people still preferred to move to this new seemingly delightful area. Raanan Geberer, a Bronx native who used to live in Co-op City and who was managing director for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, once declared that Co-op City “offered an escape hatch

to those trying to get out of the South Bronx” (NYPress.com). The same explanation is given by Harold Ostroff, executive vice-president of the United Housing Foundation at the time, who said “[a] lot of people are trying to escape from something. [...] They are running from changing neighborhoods” (Jonnes, 274-275). So, from a housing point of view, in the late 50’s and 60’s the Bronx was becoming a place where living was not desirable anymore and middle class people, above all almost the entire Jewish community, which until then had been deep-seated in the borough, started to move elsewhere, to new housing complex such as the Co-operatives as well as to suburbs like Westchester and Rockland. Estimates suggest around 500,000 out of 600,000 of them moving out of the area (Fordhamram.com). The new housing projects that were being created during those years, were destined not only for whites, but to all the people in need. However, the New York City Housing Authority (N.Y.C.H.A.), which was supposed to assign the new black and white tenants in corresponding proportion within the new public housing system, was instead more concerned with the prospective family’s ability to meet the income threshold, thus creating “low-income” projects with lower rentals mostly in the South Bronx and “middle-income” projects, located up north (GuernicaMagazine.com). Buildings of the South Bronx left vacant by whites who saw new opportunities through the Mitchell-Lama middle-income program were filled by poorer people, mainly African Americans or Puerto Ricans. This happened because, while the New York’s cityscape was changing, Puerto Rican migration to the U.S. and African-American migration to northern cities were increasing. Puerto Rican migration mainly consisted of working-class men and women that usually found low-paid jobs in blue-collar trades and in the manufacturing industries stimulated by the post-war booming economy, and who had moved to the U.S. between 1940 and 1960. In fact, in twenty years the number of Puerto Rican residents in the continental United States rose from 69,967 to 887,662 with an estimated rise in the Puerto Rican population of New York City from 61,463 to 612,574 (Korrol, 213),

to an extent that Puerto Ricans during the 60's accounted for 80% of the total Hispanic⁶ population in New York. For the islanders, formally U.S. citizens since 1917, the Bronx represented a sort of mainland. The main characteristic of the Puerto Rican community was that it was a very young community and this could explain, in part, the diffusion of Puerto Rican youth gangs discussed in Chapter 2. Although "Spanish Harlem" was still the epicenter of the Puerto Rican community at the time of the Great Migration, a large concentration of Boricuas started to settle down in the South Bronx where they were able to elect a Puerto Rican, Herman Badillo, as Bronx Borough President in 1965 (Korrol, 234) and where they were able to create a solid community also thanks to the role of salsa music⁷. By 1980, in fact, they constituted the majority of the South Bronx's population (Rodriguez, 109). In that area, for the most part, they filled vacant apartments, abandoned by the "white flight". Nuyorican poet Sandra María Esteves remembers those times by saying that "people gradually began moving toward the West Bronx [...]. You could see gradually the devastation, the abandonment moving in that same direction. Somehow this devastation was following us" (From Mambo to Hip-Hop: a South Bronx Tale).

The increase in numbers of Puerto Ricans after the end of World War II was fostered not only by the U.S. booming economy, but also by the changing political and economic scenario on the small island; the creation of the Commonwealth in 1952 helped in creating a process of democratic and capitalistic development known as *Operation Bootstrap* with the main purpose of leading the nation toward industrialization. According to Korrol, however, "[t]o insure the success of industrialization, emigration was promoted aggressively, for it was

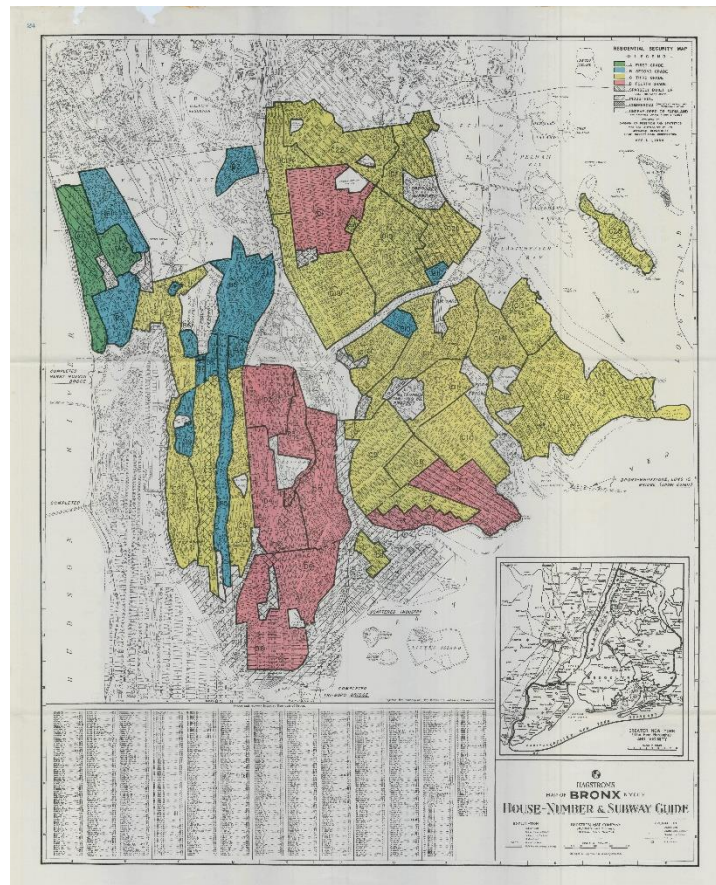
⁶ To have more information about the difference in meaning among "Latino", "Hispanic" and "Boricua" see: http://www.elboricua.com/latino_hispanic.html.

⁷ South Bronx native Bobby Sanabria in *From Mambo to Hip-hop: a South Bronx Tale* defines salsa as "Cuban music with a freakin' New York attitude."

indeed the “safety valve” envisioned by the plan’s architects” (Center For Puerto Rican Studies).

As I mentioned, the other minority group that was populating the South Bronx were the African-Americans. A considerable increase in the African American population of the neighborhood happened thanks to the Great Migration from the Southern states which started during World War I and escalated especially after 1940. Blacks were running away from an enduring system of segregation and the North, in particular during the two world wars, offered a destination where to look for jobs, due in particular to the contemporary massive draft of men into the military force. In fact, between 1940 and 1960 over 3,348,000 blacks left the South for northern and western cities and New York City was obviously among them (BlackPast.com). By 1950, of the almost 160,000 African Americans and Puerto Ricans in the Bronx, 91% of them were located in the South Bronx (Gonzalez, 109-110). The increasing “darkening” of the neighborhood, while the struggle for civil rights was going on at a national level, contributed to intensify racial tensions and accelerated the white flight. Racial tensions existed not only among the community, but were also exacerbated by overtly racist policies such as the practice of “redlining” put in place by the F.H.A. (Federal Housing Administration) in the major American cities starting from the 1930’s (although the term redlining was coined later, during the 60’s) and lasted officially until 1968. The idea behind that was to insure mortgages following the maps drawn by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (H.O.L.C.), a governmental body that had the aim of evaluating neighborhoods according to their perceived stability. From this assessment derived the decision whether or not to grant financial aid and prime services to the neighborhoods (BrickUnderground.com). The evaluation was based on a scale from A to D, where A was a “green area” for loans and D was the “red area”. As Ta-Nehisi Coates pointed out, red areas were basically where African Americans and minorities used to live (The Atlantic.com), while “green areas” were mainly

located in the suburbs. The majority of the South Bronx was redlined. This offers a further reason as to why the housing market in that area dropped along with investments and why housing abandonment increased, leading the neighborhood toward decline (BrickUnderground.com).



Redlining in the Bronx of 1938. Source: <http://www.urbanoasis.org/projects/holc-fha/digital-holc-maps/>.

However, racism hit the South Bronx not only thanks to institutions and their policies, but also thanks to its residents; Jill Jonnes, for instance, in her book interviews Helen Johnson, a woman who used to live in Roosevelt Gardens who says: “[A] great many Puerto Rican people had moved into our building and I remember being very frightened by them. They were strange, and men made noises at me when I came in and out of the building” (291). In fact, according to Gonzalez, Puerto Ricans by the 1950’s were the main concern for the residents of the neighborhood. She, too, quotes a local that says: “You can live with Negroes.

The Puerto Ricans are the trouble.” (114). Racism was a key element in the evolution of the spatial boundaries of the South Bronx area. Biased policies, an urban renewal going in the direction of favoring the idea of a city more and more defined by car distances and, as a consequence, a city where it was possible to work downtown while living in the suburbs, led to the progressive impoverishment both in terms of people and basic resources of the inner city.

A further burden to bear for the city in general and the Bronx and the South Bronx in particular, was the fiscal crisis that almost led to bankrupting the city in 1975. Describing and analyzing all the factors that led New York City to that point has been the study of eminent economists, historians and politicians and would open the debate over too many issues. What is useful to mention in my narration about the evolution of the South Bronx, is knowing that “[p]ublic debt [...] was at the core of New York’s brush with financial meltdown” starting from the 60’s. The City’s debt, also influenced by the global oil crisis of 1973 (Jacobin), reached \$11 billion in 1974 (equivalent to \$54 billion in today’s dollars). In mid-May 1975, after U.S. President Gerald Ford refused to provide a significant help to New York City’s Mayor Beame and Governor Hugh Carey who asked for federal loans, New York City was left alone and unable to pay its debts. Berman remembers, “all through the 70’s industries were departing, jobs were disappearing [and] the federal government was not just ceasing to protect it, but cutting holes in it [the safety net]” (Rubble Kings). In the end, the administration of the city was able to reach a compromise with banks and unions to avert bankruptcy. The price to pay, however, were huge budget cuts that struck categories like law enforcement, fire departments and teachers above all (TheNation.com). Although it is true that every borough suffered from these budget cuts, it is also true that the South Bronx area was one of the places most damaged by these countermeasures to the fiscal crisis. Recovering from this deep crisis was just another justification to weaken a South Bronx that was already struggling for the

reasons I mentioned before. The progressive disinterest in the fate of the community living in the South Bronx nurtured (and was fostered by) the proliferation of violent crimes and drug dealing. As I will explain more in depth in the following chapter, crime had been increasing already since the 60's, but the early 70's, with the birth of new different youth gangs, made things even worse (Gonzalez, 120). Data show how, in general, in New York City the number of murders went from 681 in 1965 to 1,690 in 1975 (TheGuardian.com), and reached a peak of 1,814 homicides in 1980. Queens and the Bronx, in particular, registered the highest rise (NYTimes.com). Indeed, according to a former gang member called D.S.R. interviewed in the documentary *Rubble Kings*, crime during those years was basically the major income of the Bronx.

Drug trade (and drug abuse) was another problem afflicting the South Bronx. Before the crack cocaine epidemic hit the streets of New York City in the 1980's, heroin, or "horse", "nod", "smack", as it was also nicknamed on the streets, was the most widespread narcotic in the city. The Bronx and the South Bronx were no exception. As former gang member Jee Sanchez recalls,

There was lines of people wrapped around the corner just waiting to buy a bundle or a couple of bags of dope. When the cops drive up and down, it was like a total pharmacy drugstore. (Rubble Kings)

Addiction rates soared starting from the early 60's as well as drug-related crimes (Gonzalez, 105; Jonnes, 142). In this regard, to understand how this issue was experienced by Bronxites, worth mentioning are some interviews with Bronx residents of those years collected through the *African American Bronx History Project* by Fordham University. In this first excerpt, the interviewer, Fordham professor Mark Naison, interviews a South Bronx resident named Joel Turner:

MN: Now do you have recollections of heroin becoming a big problem in Patterson [he means Patterson Houses in Mott Haven]? Or was ...

JT: Ya I remember guys being strung out, junkies on the corner nodding off. A lot of my friends turned to you know narcotics.

This other excerpt is an interview between Naison and another South Bronx resident, John Braithwaite:

MN: Now was there any heroin problem when you were growing up that you were aware of in your immediate area?

JB: Yes, yes. There was a man who was a son of the family across the street, the Guys, which was my mother's friend's family. And one of their sons, or might have been a grandson, because there were many generations involved, he was addicted to heroin. And he expired on a rooftop.

So, hard drugs abuse and trading was an issue affecting the life of the community and it also had an impact on the already mentioned "white flight" that took place during those years.

1.3 CONCLUSION

As I have tried to point out throughout this chapter the Bronx' history in the XX century is a history of prosperity, then rapid decline, then again complicated resurgence starting from the second half of the 80's (NYTimes.com). The protagonist of this journey has been a community that has changed together with the evolution of the borough. In the second part of the XX century, the Bronx' southernmost region in particular, has gained a worldwide notoriety thanks to the representation of its decay on the big screen. Throughout the previous pages, I have tried to show how numerous elements contributed to this decay; from biased (and racist) policies, invasive urban renewal and then institutional disinterest, to changing demography, poverty diffusion and rising crime, all of these factors interacted to create that notorious picture. Knowing the history that lies behind the movies, in this specific case, is extremely important in order to develop an incisive eye that proves able to include the works

presented within the overall context. That means, filtering the impact that could have a history that is in itself very prone to visual representation. For this reason, I think this chapter can serve as a necessary preparation for the analysis that will take place in the next chapter and in Chapter 4.

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CHAPTER 2

THE SOUTH BRONX

YOUTH GANGS' AMUSEMENT PARK

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview on the gangs of New York City during the age when they were one of the main factors in upsetting the city's ordinary street life. Discerning the complexity of gang phenomenon and the reasons that caused it to be so widespread in the neighborhood is a fundamental step in order to understand the South Bronx and to assess its representation on screen; for this reason, I decided to give this topic a chapter on its own. As I have already said, according to Jeff Chang, the history of gangs is mainly oral and, as a consequence, partially incomplete or inevitably inaccurate. Nevertheless, there is a vast bibliography and videography about New York youth gangs; for this reason, I believe combining these two sources can be exhaustive enough. To start a journey through the gang world, at least two clarifications related to the definition and the origins of gangs are needed.

First of all, it is important to have clearly in mind what a gang is; scholars in recent years have provided definitions of the word "gang" that are so different among each other that "[t]he only agreement about what constitutes a gang, its members, and its activities is disagreement" (Shelden, Tracy and Brown, 40). To try to avoid criticism, I am going to provide the official federal and state definitions of gangs. The federal definition of gangs is:

- A. An association of three or more individuals;
- B. Whose members collectively identify themselves by adopting a group identity, which they use to create an atmosphere of fear or intimidation, frequently by employing one or more of the following: a common name, slogan, identifying sign, symbol, tattoo or other physical marking, style or color of clothing, hairstyle, hand sign or graffiti;

C. Whose purpose in part is to engage in criminal activity and which uses violence or intimidation to further its criminal objectives.

D. Whose members engage in criminal activity or acts of juvenile delinquency that if committed by an adult would be crimes with the intent to enhance or preserve the association's power, reputation or economic resources.

E. The association may also possess some of the following characteristics:

1. the members may employ rules for joining and operating within the association.
2. The members may meet on a recurring basis.
3. The association may provide physical protection of its members from others.
4. The association may seek to exercise control over a particular geographic location or region, or it may simply defend its perceived interests against rivals.
5. The association may have an identifiable structure.

The most accepted state definition of gangs, the one that is used by the majority of states derives from California legislature and states that

criminal street gang' means any ongoing organization, association or group of three or more persons, whether formal or informal, having as one of its primary activities the commission of one or more of the criminal acts [...], having a common name or common identifying sign or symbol, and whose members individually or collectively engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal gang activity.

Second, the other clarification serves mostly as a reminder; gangs are not just an American thing and are not limited to the XX and XXI centuries. In fact, there were groups of people that can be described as gangs already in the early XIV and XV centuries in Europe (Shelden, Tracy and Brown, Introduction). It is a phenomenon that is not new to any of the current European states. This could be also an explanation of why an Italian film director like Enzo G. Castellari (and other Italian film directors on his wake like Aristide Massaccesi with *Endgame* of 1983 and Vanio Amici with *The Bronx Executioner* of 1987) during the 80's was fascinated by the history of Bronx gangs. Gangs, in fact, lie in the collective imagination both of Europe and the United States.

2.2 BIRTH, DEATH AND REBIRTH OF GANGS IN POSTWAR NEW YORK CITY

On the American soil, gangs allegedly developed on the East Coast around 1783 and New York City was one of the first places where this problem was spotted. Herbert Asbury wrote about youth gangs born in the “Five Points” area of New York City around late 1800s. His book, actually, was the inspiration for Martin Scorsese’s award-winning *Gangs of New York*, which is a story of the development and subsequent clash of gangs in that area of New York. At the time (the movie is set in 1846), gang members were generally not professional criminals, but ordinary workers as is accurately portrayed in the movie, and in fact, the leader of the local mob (William Cutting, performed by Daniel Day-Lewis) was nicknamed “The Butcher” because of his profession. These gangs at the time controlled the worst parts of New York City and were primarily made up of the Irish. Then, after the end of the Civil War and in particular during the period from 1880 to 1920, Italian and Jewish immigrants took the lead and many of them continued this tradition in the decades that followed. After World War II and especially after the great migration of African Americans from the South of the U.S. and of Hispanics from Latin America, the number of youth gangs increased again and New York City and the Bronx, in particular, came to be one of the first places to see this increase, thanks to all the various factors already analyzed in Chapter 1. In fact, Steven Cureton affirms that

the mass migration of Southern Blacks (seeking better employment opportunities and social conditions) landed many of them in urban locales near all White neighborhoods, which sparked interracial conflict. (351)

And he continues: “White male youth groups formed and violently resisted racial integration of neighborhoods, which led to Black brotherhoods evolving into social protection groups.” (351) Progressive gentrification on one side along with the respective segregation of black and Hispanic families on the other, led to a situation in which these people did not have access to the instruments and the opportunities to pursue an American Dream that, in truth, was based

on individualism, success and materialistic values such as the greed for money, imposed by a society that was thriving after the end of World War II. Political economist Andrew Torres states that:

One of the great inconsistencies of the boom years was that racial/ethnic minorities were being excluded from an equal share in the benefits of economic growth. The response to a perceived obstructionism on the part of the status quo was a resurgence of ethnicity-based struggles. (27)

So, alternative ways to realize their own Dream and to protect themselves from the rest of the population that could enjoy such privileges and that did not accept diversity, became real under the form of political activism but also through gangs that “became entrenched in the social fabric of the urban underclass” (Cureton, 352). This idea, among all of the different theories about why there are gangs in the first place, helps to explain gangs in a sociological way. In fact, following the Strain theory (also called Anomie) originated with Robert Merton in his book *Social Structure and Anomie* of 1938, gang delinquency can be considered as a dark side of the American Dream that derives from the fact that “the same forces that promote progress and ambition also produce a lot of crime because there is such and incredible pressure to succeed at any cost” (Shelden, Tracy and Brown, 202). And in this situation social institutions often fail to be the answer for the needs of part of the population (especially the poor and minorities) leading people to find alternative ways of meeting needs.

World War II marked a turning point in the redesccovery of youth gangs as a major social problem (Schneider, 54-55), in an escalation that accellerated in the 50’s, seemingly slowing down in the early 60’s and then returning powerfully in late 60’s and early 70’s in particular in the South Bronx, where the decline and abandonment of some areas led to an increase in people who wanted to take hold of those “no man’s lands”. According to Berman,

one of the byproducts of those years of deep crisis was “a lot of kids out on the street and a lot of locations that would have been alternatives to the street ceasing to exist” (Rubble Kings). In that situation, gangs became a way to enjoy time together and to “have each other’s back” in case of need. In fact, as Ghetto Brothers founder, Benjy Melendez recalls, his gang started as a family thing involving him and his brothers, and only after a while did it become something bigger.

During late 40’s gang fights emerged on racial lines, in particular in those neighborhoods of New York City, such as Morrisania in the South Bronx, where the ethnic composition of the area was changing. Due to the contemporaneous commitment of the U.S. in World War II, in addition, things became more violent not only overseas but also at home, thanks to the increasing availability of weapons. Father Banome of Saint Jerome’s Church in Tremont, South Bronx, remembers: “I was just amazed at the struggle between them [Irish and Puerto Ricans], the absolute hatred and disregard. It manifested itself mainly in gang fights” (Jonnes, 114). Gang fights in New York City had an escalation in the decade between late 40’s and late 50’s, but, as I said, they experienced an apparent decline in early 60’s. As Eric Schneider explains in his book *Vampires, Dragons and Egyptian Kings*, this happened thanks to the convergence of many factors.

First of all, an effective cooperation between the Youth Board and police departments (Schneider, 221). The Youth Board, whose number of workers near quadrupled from 1955 to 1965, developed in response to the one hundred gang murders which occurred in the city in the 50s and operated all-over the city. In the Bronx it was active mainly in the neighborhoods of Morrisania-Belmont and Mott-Haven-Longwood (Klein, 141-143). The activity of gang workers was essentially based on prevention on the streets, and because of that, their work became effective, above all, principally thanks to the synergy with police departments. Second, along with public and private mobilization on a street level, the historical period in

itself influenced the temporary demise of gangs during the early 60's. That was the period, for example, of the so called Joint Warfare in South Vietnam; as Schneider states, in fact, "[b]etween enlistments and the draft, the pool of eligible gang members shrank after 1966" (228). In addition, war economy incentivized the creation of new job positions, particularly appealing to those who were looking for a way out of gang life. The U.S. controversial behavior in foreign policy along with a domestic situation that was more and more on the edge of collapse, led to an increase in the politicization of organized groups. In 1966 the Black Panther Party was founded in Oakland, CA, while the Young Lords was founded in Chicago in 1968. Both organizations soon found a fruitful ground in New York City. According to the article "New York Are You Ready For the New Ultra Violence" published in the *New York Magazine* in 1972, in fact, Black Panthers, Black Muslims and Young Lords were among the leading figures in the resurgence of gangs. However, I strongly disagree with that analysis and I tend to share more the idea that those political movements were responsible for channeling youth energies toward political activism instead of gang banging, as advocated by Schneider too (224). Afrika Bambaataa himself acknowledged that in an interview in which he declared:

[W]e had many organizations that was out there all coming to wake up many of the communities. Like the Nation of Islam, the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords Party. We had to try to teach and wake up the communities to be warriors for your community instead of being destructors. (Hip-Hop Evolution)

In any case, this does not change the fact that the actual success in doing so should be carefully weighted up. Third, it is also worth mentioning the policies enacted by New York City's Mayor John Lindsay, who was in charge from 1966 to 1973. Contrary to what happened for example in Chicago, where Mayor Richard J. Daley supported a "shoot to kill" war on gangs, Lindsay proposed "a policy of outreach" to the gangs and even went out on the streets during 1968 riots (Hagedorn, 16). According to Schneider, his policies "contributed to maintaining the peace [...] and absorbed the energies of gang members" (228).

In the background, as I briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, a disquieting herald of death was taking control of the streets to the extent that “American heroin users had their own nation, and New York City was its capital” (Smack, 1). In fact, it was precisely in those years that U.S. President Richard Nixon started his national “war on drugs” with a Special Message to Congress in which he listed some data such as that “[b]etween the years 1960 and 1967, juvenile arrests involving the use of drugs rose by almost 800 percent” and that “New York City alone [had] records of some 40,000 heroin addicts” (UCSB.edu).

Abuse and trade of heroin in the streets of New York City had a peculiar relationship with gangs’ existence. As is explained by Schneider, a common idea at the time was that heroin killed gangs. This is what emerges, for example, in the above mentioned report on gangs published by the New York Magazine in 1972. In fact, according to the author, Gene Weingarten, “[there was] a new kind of ghetto street worker- the dope pusher. Heroin destroyed the gangs”. However, Schneider’opinion is that the heroin boom was just another, albeit crucial, factor that, along with the ones already listed, contributed to the demise of gangs in the 60’s by offering an alternative way to escape reality and the inconsistency of the American Dream, in a way that seemed less dangerous than gang-banging in the streets chased by police. That is basically what Felipe Luciano, co-founder of the Young Lords chapter in New York City, affirms when he says that “they go into heroin because there was no dream” (Rubble Kings). Also, heroin contributed to alter the natural turnover in gang’s chain of command (Schneider, 236). On the other hand, as noted by former gang member Jee Sanchez, “when the drug trade came in the city, that totally changed the whole vibe on how we rumble. Now it’s serious. Now we’re gonna start shooting at each other.” Drug-related crimes rose along with the narcotics business in itself which was becoming more and more profitable to the extent that even the Mafia leaders decided to end their self-imposed ban on narcotics and reenter the market (Gangster Report). The experience in dealing with the heroin plague was

an important factor that characterized the “rebirth” of gangs in late 60’s and early 70’s. New gang members had accumulated experience in dealing with the tremendous impact that heroin had on families and on the ordinary life of the community and for this reason they identified “junkies” as main targets of their actions. Although drug abuse was forbidden within a gang, the organization usually admitted ex-junkies, or more generally, people who believed in the gang as a way to free themselves from the “smack”. This is what emerges from the archive videos of gang meetings where members very often present themselves as ex junkies that had been clean since they joined the organization.

Together with the activity of keeping the block safe from drug-addicts, inter-gang violence and violence involving cops and gang members was becoming the norm (in 1971 Yellow Benjy declared: “The enemy around the Bronx now, at this very moment, is the policemen”). In particular, the South Bronx, which in the 70’s was basically a “no man’s land” without any kind of civil order, became an ideal place for the resurgence of gangs. Data reported by Schneider shows how by 1971 between 15 and 25 gangs had established themselves in that area. In *Rubble Kings*, Blackie, Savage Skulls’ president, identifies at least 101 gangs in the borough, even though the period he is referring to is not clear. An article that appeared in *The New York Times* in June 1973 lists gang membership as high as 11,000 (Flyin’ Cut Sleeves). Whatever the numbers were, the number of gangs was undoubtedly large. Their names and their peculiar style of clothing, usually inspired by the Onepercenters Motorcycle Gangs, are now already in the collective imagination: Savage Nomads, Black Spades, Seven Immortals, Ghetto Brothers, Turbans, Royal Javelins, Peacemakers, Reapers, Young Sinners just to name some of the most famous gangs born in the Bronx. It is hard to accurately tell the story of each one of these gangs, mainly for the reason I explained at the beginning of this chapter, that is to say, the fact that their history is mainly oral and needs a research on field to be really effective. However, are at least two of them are worth mentioning, probably most

importantly for the impact they had in transforming the “nihilistic implosion” into “creative explosion”: the Ghetto Brothers and the Black Spades. The Ghetto Brothers were founded by the already mentioned Benjy “Yellow” Melendez in 1967, together with his siblings Robert and Victor. They started as a family affair in the streets of the South Bronx, but Yellow Benjy recalls that after a while they had no less than 2,500 members in the Bronx alone (Rubble Kings). Benjy’s history becomes relevant in my narration because his gang was among the first to promote and organize a peace meeting involving all of the major gangs of the borough in order to stop violence and create a coalition demanding better conditions for the abandoned people of the ‘hood’ and better relations with law enforcement. In fact, gangs were evolving into a more politicized version of earlier gangs. Proof of that is also the fact that in 1971 Yellow Benjy used to say “we are not a gang anymore. We’re an organization” and he made speeches like this one:

We are being oppressed by the North American yankee. We the Puerto Ricans should rise up and defend ourselves against these dogs who will oppress us and liberate our country from capitalism and imperialism, the North American is trying to steal our identity as Puerto Ricans and call us Americans. (Rubble Kings)

The meeting that took place on December 7, 1971 in the Boys Club in Hoe Avenue, South Bronx, involved at least 68 gangs, the so called “Family”, and was organized to avoid open war after the murder of Black Benji, who had been beaten to death by some rival gangs (allegedly Mongols, Immortals and Black Spades) while he was negotiating peace. Although it is true that this meeting was a turning point in gang history and it is also true that from that moment onwards gangs started to be more and more involved in improving the community, it cannot be forgotten that gang rivalry did not stop all of a sudden after that meeting. In fact, the fiscal crisis that was corroding New York City during those years led to “fewer jobs, a smaller military, a shrinking civil service bureaucracy, vanishing antipoverty programs”

(Schneider, 245) that contributed to exacerbate the gangs' presence, above all, in the area emblematic of the crisis, the South Bronx.

The Ghetto Brothers also need to be mentioned for their parallel activity in the music business; their band organized with Benjy on lead vocals, his brother Robert on rhythm guitar, his cousin Victor on bass, Chiqui Concepción on congas, David Silva on lead guitar, Angelo Garcia on bongos, and Franky Valentin on timbales was well-known in the South Bronx for its festive jam sessions. After the peace treaty, when the gang decided to focus its efforts decisively on music, they used to play every Friday night in the neighborhood. According to Yellow Benjy himself, that's when a young Black Spade member called Kevin Donovan, a.k.a. Afrika Bambaataa, understood the power of music to unite the people of the neighborhood in a peaceful way (ABC News).

At the time, Bambaataa was the warlord of the Black Spades and it is precisely for this reason that it is worth devoting a few more words to that gang. The Black Spades were an African-American gang born in the Bronx in 1968 which soon developed departments in every borough to the extent that many considered it to be the largest (and most violent) gang in New York City at the time. Former Black Spade original Zulu King Charlie Rock remembers that a lot of division leaders were assassinated by the police in the early 70's and he quotes this as another factor leading many of them to transfer their energy into b-boyin' and breakdancin' (YouTube.com). So, from the Black Spades, Bambaataa founded in 1973 the Universal Zulu Nation, a youth-oriented organization with the aim of bringing peace, unity, love and having fun to the neighborhood through music (TheHuffingtonPost.com). To highlight the different outcomes that derived from diverting focus from gang banging to music, it is worth quoting two songs one by the Ghetto Brothers and the other by Afrika Bambaataa. In the summer of 1972, the Ghetto Brothers recorded their first and only studio-album titled *Power – Fuerza*,

which among other songs, contained the song *Viva Puerto Rico Libre*. The following is an excerpt from that song:

Ahora vamos a enseñarle a esta gente ahora,
que nosotros nunca nos olvidamos que seamos boricuas.
Me encanta la musica, la musica criolla.
Que viva las islas de Puerto Rico
de mi corazón.

The other song, *Planet Rock* by Afrika Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force that came out in 1982 has these lyrics:

It's time to chase your dreams
Up out your seats, make your body sway
Socialize, get down, let your soul lead the way
Shake it now, go ladies, it's a livin' dream
Love, life, live

Both excerpts reveal important advances in gang mentality toward political consciousness and positive vibrations and build an important bridge between gang life and music.

In 1983 police reported 5,179 gang members in the city, down from about 12,000 that gave life to at least 150/200 gangs in the 70's. However, as I said in the previous chapter, this general evolution of gang members toward a more aware behavior did not go hand in hand with a decrease in crimes. Proof of this is that the *New York Times* in 1981 labelled 1980 as the “worst year of crime in city history”. Gangs, especially in the devastated South Bronx, loosened their ties with the turf, moving instead toward drug trade and robberies. Criminologist and anthropologist Walter B. Miller said that “[i]n reality there is always gang activity. Sometimes it generates more publicity than at other times” (NYTimes.com). The tremendous epidemic of crack cocaine that hit New York City by the early 80's, clearly contributed to maintain gangs as a hot topic in the public debate. Crack diffusion in American

cities was huge, above all thanks to the fact that it was cheaper than the similar powder cocaine and was soon considered as a national emergency. The racist measures enacted in response to that boom by the Reagan administration and their disastrous effects on mass incarceration of minorities deserve an in-depth analysis that, however, goes far beyond the remit of this chapter and this dissertation. What is worth mentioning here concerning the evolution of gangs is that the crack epidemic has contributed to the birth of “drug gangs”, shifting their focus from the protection of the turf for “social” reasons to the defense of it for economic purposes (Schneider, 249).

2.3 CONCLUSION

Clearly, the ganga phenomenon is a very complex issue that needs a full knowledge not only of American history, but also of sociology, anthropology and psychology at least. It is too easy, in fact, to jump to conclusions and fall into banal stereotyping. Unfortunately, this is exactly what happened in the representation of gangs and crime in the Bronx and the South Bronx in some of the movies that came out during the 70’s and 80’s. The analysis of the filmic depiction of the neighborhood and of the scenes that contributed to shape its boundaries both in fiction and in reality during the end of the XX century is the object of the next chapter.

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CHAPTER 3

THE REPRESENTATION OF THE SOUTH BRONX

FROM *THE WARRIORS* TO *BEAT STREET*

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter develops a thematic analysis of some of the most relevant movies of the 70's and 80's set entirely (or partially) in the South Bronx. A brief introduction is necessary to clarify some of the aspects that will be treated in this chapter.

First of all, I decided to focus on the movies made in that specific period in order to see exactly how that moment both of turmoil and change was perceived by the contemporary motion picture industry and how it was re-elaborated and then presented to a broader audience. I will also highlight the differences with *The Get Down*, which will be the subject of the following chapter, at the same time trying to give an explanation of why filmic representations of the time did not portray in their entirety the nuances that characterized this particular neighborhood. Second, I must admit that, due to the limited space, and given the number of movies to be taken into consideration and, above all, in order not to weigh my dissertation down too much, this analysis will not be as accurate as the one undertaken for *The Get Down*. However, this does not mean that this chapter will be incomplete, but only that the movies will not be analyzed scene by scene.

The situation of the Bronx and the South Bronx during the second half of the XX century lent itself to being represented on screen. Fires and gangs, but also graffiti and breakdance had a power that lied on their visual impact. These were manifestations, negative as well as positive, that can not leave the eye of the viewer indifferent. This happened because of the fact that they all challenged the pre-established order of things and events. No one, for

example, expected to see youth gangs dressed like ancient warriors or people dancing and rotating on their heads like the breakdancers do. The movie industry during the years when all of that came out had to find ways to portray these social and artistic manifestations adding something more to their reality, in order to give a meaning to their filmic transposition. The epic and the costumes we see in *The Warriors* are a response to that, as well as the apocalyptic settings in *1990: The Bronx Warriors*. On the other side, the same can be said of the giant graffiti we see in *Wild Style* and the long breakdancing battles of *Beat Street*. However, it is because of that desire to do something more by hook or by crook, that the movies of that period often tended to give only a partial overview on that particular moment of the cultural history of the U.S. Throughout my analysis in this chapter I am going to try to explain my point, also linking my arguments with *The Get Down* in order to show how that series has been able to succeed where these movies failed, that is, in representing a neighborhood characterized by “nihilistic implosion” and “creative explosion”. My analysis will be developed starting from the assumption that the movies of the late 70’s and early 80’s can be divided into two large groups: on the one hand there are those movies that depicted the South Bronx as if it was a “jungle”, a “war zone” with no rules and no future. On the other, there is a series of movies that portrayed the South Bronx as if it was a land of opportunity and creativity for young adults with talent.

3.2 “YOU KNOW, THIS IS THE BRONX. NOTHING IS WORSE THAN THIS HELLHOLE”: THE “NIHILISTIC IMPLOSION” OF THE SOUTH BRONX

The “nihilistic implosion” of the Bronx and the South Bronx was sensed by the movie industry of those years and exaggerated in its filmic transposition. As I have already said throughout this work, the public perception of this region as “third world” or “hellhole” not

only in the U.S. but basically all-around the world, was established in the long term by the often violent, sometimes biased and apocalyptic images of parts of the movies that were set in that area. In this chapter in particular, I am going to take into consideration *The Warriors* of 1979, *Fort Apache*, *The Bronx* of 1981 and *1990: The Bronx Warriors* of 1982. Obviously, this list does not include every movie that used the setting of the Bronx as the symbol of a devastated environment, but these are, for different reasons, the movies that can be considered as more relevant and that can be taken as examples in my dissertation without risking an incomplete analysis of the topic.

The Warriors by Walter Hill is nowadays considered a cult movie and probably does not need to be extensively presented. References to it can be spotted from the popular animated sitcom *The Simpsons* to a song like *m.A.A.d City* by Kendrick Lamar (with the line: “Warriors and Conans” that is mentioned in order to allude, in that case, to Compton gangs). The plot is inspired by the namesake novel by Sol Yurick published in 1965. Like the novel, the movie is based on the *Anabasis* by the Greek soldier and writer Xenophon. The parallel between the historical events and the story presented in the movie is given at the beginning. The caption says:

Over two millenniums ago, an army of Greek soldiers found themselves isolated in the middle of the Persian Empire. One thousand miles from safety. One thousand miles from the sea. One thousand miles with enemies on all sides. There was a story of a desperate forced march. There was a story of courage.

This too is a story of courage.

The movie narrates the struggle back home of *The Warriors*, a Coney Island gang, from the Bronx, where they had to participate at a gang meeting called by Cyrus of the Gramercy Riffs to organize New York City gangs in order to overpower the police and takeover the city. Their journey back home is complicated by the fact that they have been unfairly accused of the murder of Cyrus and, as a consequence, all the gangs are trying to get back at

them. What is relevant to underline for my dissertation is the representation of the Bronx that can be extrapolated by the movie. The gang meeting was clearly inspired by the real gang meeting that took place on December 7 1971 at the Boys Club in Hoe Avenue in the South Bronx and for this reason I tend to assume that the “Conclave” is ideally set in a park located in the South Bronx (or nearby in the borough), even if it is not openly said in the movie. The borough, where all the action takes place at night (in the book it is the night of the 4th of July), is presented as a place full of potentially-violent gangs. Every gang is there (except for the low-class gang of The Orphans who were not invited) and, above all, there is no one around in the streets apart from gang members. The atmosphere is tense and quite spectral. Danger for ordinary people seems lurking everywhere. An example of that is the scene in which one of The Warriors, Ajax, tries to forcedly seduce a woman sitting on a bench (who is later revealed to be an undercover cop). The Bronx, then, is a place where no one is safe and even The Warriors themselves are in danger there, after they have been accused of killing Cyrus by The Rogues (led by the actual killer, Luther). So, the Bronx is presented as gang-infested and also, above all, as the place where a murder committed in public remains unpunished by law enforcement. Police come in after that event, but in fact they have no possibility of stopping anyone. Justice is brought to bear by the gangs themselves. It seems that gang members are the real citizens of this dark neighborhood and they are free to act both as victims and perpetrators. An example of this “private” justice is when, soon after the murder, Warriors leader Cleon is beaten to death by The Riffs as a way to make him pay for the deed he is supposed to have committed. The Bronx is the center of crime and is presented as a place where you do not want to go unless you are looking for trouble, because trouble is what happens in that borough. This is also what emerges while reading the original script of the movie. In it there is a dialog between Cleon and his girlfriend, Lincoln, that was supposed to

be at the beginning of the movie and that was later cut (because the producers wanted to set all the movie at night, except for the final scene), in which she says:

I'm worried about you [Cleon] going. I've got a feeling. [...] I don't want you getting messed up with something heavy way off in the Bronx. You never even been up there...

The Bronx is automatically associated with a bad feeling. They have never been there before but they already know it for its bad reputation. This idea is implicitly confirmed in another introductory scene that is in the original script but was cut from the final version. It is a presentation of the gangs of every borough and the Bronx is described as “[s]trewn with rubble. Lined with the shells of burned-out buildings” (Hill). These excerpts from the script, even if they do not appear in the final version of the movie, show how the starting point for the filmic representation of the Bronx was based on the idea of showing something dangerous and devastated. The fact that it is also full of gangs and that a murder happens there, adds further elements that go in this direction. However, if this film portrays a “nihilistic implosion” that is somewhat set “sometime in the future”, as the caption at the beginning says, revealing, at the same time, a supposed detachment from the reality of the city that allows the viewers to see the movie as a history of urban epic, the same cannot be said of *Fort Apache*, *The Bronx*. This movie is instead deeply linked to the reality of the 41st precinct of the South Bronx, a place that was considered as one of the most crime-ridden in the country. Directed by Daniel Petrie and starring a superstar like Paul Newman in the main role, the film, whose name was significantly inspired by the 1948 American western *Fort Apache* by John Ford, is about the daily survival of a police department in a region full of tensions and where everything, in every moment, can result in an explosion of unrest and chaos. This unstable situation is seen through the eyes of Murphy/Newman, a cop who is torn between his loyalty to his colleagues and his loyalty to the community of the South Bronx that he is supposed to serve and protect. The tone of the movie in describing the neighborhood can be grasped from the first scene in

which we see a drugged woman who kills two cops in broad daylight. Then, a series of shocking events come in succession: a transvestite threatens to kill himself by jumping from the top of a building, a guy robs an old lady right in front of the cops, a riot explodes after some guys of the South Bronx Peoples Party have been arrested, two cops kill a young man by throwing him off the roof for no reason, a drug dealer kills a prostitute, a shooting takes place at the hospital. The South Bronx appears like a jungle and its residents are depicted like wild animals. It seems to be in a 'state of nature' as theorized by British philosopher Thomas Hobbes; the police, who are supposed to be the law or authority in fact do not exist and they too are part of the battle for 'self-preservation' where only the fittest can survive. Proof of that is that cops kill and are killed without any real consequence. Even in the end, when the two guilty patrolmen are turned in by Murphy, we actually do not know what happens to them, that is, whether they are sentenced or not. The neighborhood is presented as something that swallows everything in its "nihilistic implosion". From the new Captain of the precinct, Captain Connolly, whose law and order methods have the single outcome of causing a revolt, to Isabella, a kind nurse who dies from a heroin overdose, every action committed in that region seems to feed a spiral of self-destruction. The people living in the neighborhood seem to mirror the piles of rubble that surround them and a symbolic confirmation of that is the last framing of the movie in which we see a dead body rolled up in a carpet that is abandoned on a huge mass of rubbish, merging perfectly with the rest of the litter.



It is a living hell where it is almost impossible to find people that are not involved in killings, pimping, drug-dealing and corruption. Paul Stacy and Virginia Hale described it as a sort of allegory of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in which "the South Bronx is, like Dante's *Inferno*, presented as circles [...], raging out from Station 41, Fort Apache" (54). In the end, salvation is conceded to Murphy, but for the neighborhood there seems to be no redemption. Emblematic of that is the last scene in which we see Murphy and his colleague chasing the same guy that robbed the old lady at the beginning. It is a vicious circle in which the "nihilistic implosion" is inevitable and, above all, irreversible.

This movie, obviously provoked a great deal of controversy especially from the Puerto Rican and African-American minorities living in the neighborhood at the time. To stop the shooting of this movie – which seemed to be based on the book *Fort Apache: New York's Most Violent Precinct* published in 1976 by a police officer, Tom Walker, from the 41st Precinct in the South Bronx, and which had been labelled as "anti Puerto-Rican and anti-Black" – the community decided to form a coalition, the Committee Against Fort Apache. New York teacher Richard "Richie" Perez remembers that the C.A.F.A., of which he was one of the main organizers, analyzed in depth the screenplay of the movie and concluded that the film presented a "one sided, biased picture [that selected] consciously the most sensational things, dehumanizing and degrading [the community] and ignoring the causes of [its]

problems” (MediaJusticeHistoryProject.com). These opinions were also shared by political figures like Representative Robert Garcia and City Councilman Gilberto Gerena.Valentin, both Democrats of the Bronx and even the commanding officer of the 41st Precinct, Captain Redmond P. Burke, who declared that the film was “silly, inaccurate and distorted” (NYTimes.com). So, the protests continued in the streets as well as in institutional forums and in its first week in movie theaters in February 1981 it was cancelled by the Gemini theater at Second Avenue and East 64th Street (NYTimes.com) and postponed in the cities of Philadelphia and Jersey.



With its international appeal, *Fort Apache, The Bronx* permitted a representation of that region that was pushed to the extreme consequences of its “nihilistic implosion”. This was the case of the last movie presented in this paragraph, that is, *1990: The Bronx Warriors* by Enzo G. Castellari. As I have already said, the fact that an Italian filmmaker decided to set his movie in the Bronx was in itself a proof of the success that media and movies such as the one by Petrie had in crossing national boundaries to reach a broader and heterogeneous audience. Nonetheless, it must be said that *1990: The Bronx Warriors*, as Castellari himself confirmed, had more success in the U.S. (where it stayed for weeks at position number five in

the well-known chart issued by the magazine *Variety*) than in Italy (taxidriver.it). It narrates the story of a young rich heiress who runs away from Manhattan to hide in the “hellhole” of the Bronx. She falls in love with Trash, the gang leader of The Riders, a young man who wants to protect her from the ruthless mercenary/cop Hammer, hired to rescue her and bring her back Downtown. In this movie we see picturesque gangs such as The Riders, Zombies, Tigers, Iron Men, Scavengers, clearly inspired by the already mentioned *The Warriors* by Walter Hill. Also, similar to that movie is the fact that, again, the film is set in the future, in this case a post-apocalyptic 1990. As the caption at the beginning says,

1990. The Bronx is officially declared “no man’s land”. The authorities give up all attempts to restore law and order. From then on, the area is ruled by The Riders.

Again, as we have seen portrayed, although in different ways, in the already mentioned movies, the Bronx is “a state of nature”, where the law, when it exists, is dictated by criminals. Here too, the cops, or rather, the people representing the law, are an active part in the progressive implosion of this region. One of the special vigilantes who is flying over the borough looking for the girl, says: “If it were up to me I cleaned the whole goddamn borough with napalm”, reinforcing the idea of being in front of a war zone (the same place, in fact, had been nicknamed “Beirut” in *Fort Apache, The Bronx*). That area is not considered to be part of America and it is like an enemy territory that is not worth saving. The gang members, the only human beings that seem to live in that place, are in fact like soldiers and some of them, The Scavengers, live in tunnels that look like actual anti bomb shelters. Like troops, in fact, The Riders are looking for war (“Let’s go to war! War! War! War!” they scream in unison after two of them were killed) and, as Trash says, “[they] live with death every single day”, like fighters in a conflict. The presence of a castle within the borough, inhabited by Ogre, Tigers’ leader, and proclaimed the “king of the Bronx”, conveys the idea that that place is beyond time and reality and that what happens there has no interest for the rest of the city. In

fact, the viewer notices the castle only when it is under siege. The Bronx we observe in this film seems to be the continuation of the representation we saw in *Fort Apache, The Bronx*; those events were the symptoms and these are the (future) consequences, or the incurable disease in metaphor. A burnt-to-the-ground place populated only by gangs where “the worst things happen by themselves”, as Trash solemnly affirms. Actually, the worst thing in this depiction of the borough and its community is that there is no salvation for that region. Proof of that is the fact that at the end of the movie everyone is dead and the only person alive, Trash, is acting cruelly against his enemy Hammer’s corpse. Everything starts and ends with violence, in an endless spiral of criminality which erodes any kind of hope and that is similar to what we have seen in *Fort Apache, The Bronx*. Thus, in all of the movies listed in this paragraph, the “nihilistic implosion” of the Bronx of the second half of the XX century is decidedly overrepresented.

3.3 “YOU CAN KEEP YOUR DREAMS, BUT GET SOMETHING TO FALL BACK ON”: THE “CREATIVE EXPLOSION” OF THE SOUTH BRONX

The first half of the 80’s were not only the worst years in crime for New York City (DisasterCenter.com), but also the years when hip-hop culture started to be exploited as a potential global phenomenon. In fact, it all began in 1980 thanks to the already mentioned song “Rapper’s Delight” by The SugarHill Gang that achieved worldwide going Platinum in Canada, Gold in Spain, Silver in the United Kingdom and reaching more than 2,000,000 sales in the United States. The fact that only one of the three members comprising the band was from the Bronx, did not matter too much to the media and a new interest in that region emerged. Since hip-hop culture had been made by urban youngsters, the movie industry developed products aimed at that sort of consumers, the so called “breakploitation” movies.

The term “breaksploitation”, inspired obviously by the word “blaxploitation”, in itself showed a possible ambiguity; the idea behind that was, as the word suggests, to realize films that took advantage of a rising art (breakdance) and of the surrounding environment. The ambiguity lies in its association with the word blaxploitation, a term that has been the object of a never ending debate over the years. As writer and filmmaker David Walker states: “Is the term positive or negative? [...] Some say that blaxploitation is a terrible word and horribly offensive, while others say it is a perfect way to describe films of that era” (Walker, Introduction). This new trend of filmic production, as we will also see in the early 90’s when the movie industry produced specific movies following the emerging wave of “gangsta rap”, such as *Boyz n the Hood*, *Menace II Society* and *New Jack City*, had a very defined pattern of reference. The real challenge for those low-budget movies, a list that goes from *Beat Street*, *Breakin’* (1 and 2), *Body Rock* to a hip-hop movie like *Krush Groove*, was to convey the idea of a “culture”, that is something that was not just an extemporaneous phenomenon, but instead the outcome of a very complex period in a specific region of the United States. Among these movies, my focus will be particularly on *Beat Street*. First of all, because of the direct link it has with the neighborhood, the South Bronx, that serves as the setting of the movie. Second, because of the impact it had on popular culture; an example is the lyrics of the song *Suicidal Thoughts* of 1994 by Brooklyn-born rapper Notorious B.I.G. in which he makes a reference to this movie:

Should I die on the train track, like Ramo in Beat Street

People at the funeral fronting like they miss me

So, *Beat Street* can be both representative of that current of filmic production and of the way in which the neighborhood was depicted in those movies. Released in 1984 and directed by Stan Lathan, it narrates basically the birth of a love story between Kenny, a.k.a. “Double K”, a talented D.J. from the South Bronx, and Tracy, a young music student at the City College of

New York. It is a love affair between two completely different worlds, as is also highlighted by the song by Jenny Burton & Patrick Jude that serves as soundtrack while the couple is romantically walking together at night:

Worlds that come together
Somehow we have found
A bridge across our different?
To come and go

The idea of presenting a love story as a device to show the characteristics of the period and the region in which the story is set is something that can be found in all of the movies that are being discussed in this chapter and also in the tv series *The Get Down*. The plot is simple because there are many other collateral aspects that deserve to have their cinematic adaptation. In *Beat Street*, in particular, we observe a South Bronx in which some young talented adults are developing creative ways to express themselves. So, for example, along with Kenny, who is a D.J., there is his little brother Lee, who is an outstanding breaker and Ramo (short for Ramon) who is a graffiti writer, or “bomber” as those people were called. This film is also characterized by long rap performances as well as graffiti writing and breakdance battles. In fact, the breakdance battle at The Roxy, one of the biggest and most important nightclubs of New York City, between the Bronx Rockers crew and the Beat Street Breakers, is one of the focal moments in the movie. The two crews are interpreted respectively by the Rock Steady Crew and the New York City Breakers. These, however, are not the only professional artists appearing in the production. There are also Afrika Bambaataa & Soulsonic Force, Grandmaster Flash, Melle Mel & Furious Five, D.J. Kool Herc and The Treacherous Three among the others. The idea of using real artists to play themselves or their alter ego is common in every one of the above mentioned movies and the reasons are different: first of all, forms of art like rapping or breakdancing needed highly skilled individuals who are professionals in their field, more than just actors. Second, hip-hop was just at its dawn and interpreting such

roles was not so yearned for. Third, that emerging movement was perceived as a something deeply rooted in the urban community and so, as a consequence, deeply linked to the people that contributed to its expansion, a development that can be portrayed only with a high degree of “authenticity”.

However, what I contend here, is that the actual connections with what is being presented do not automatically convey the atmosphere of a place, in this case the South Bronx, in a specific period, in this case the early 80’s. The already mentioned Jeff Chang labels *Beat Street* and the like as “kid-friendly Broadway production, scrubbed clean for prime-time, force-fitted into one-size-fits-all” (Chang, 194). Whether or not *Beat Street* was well acted or directed, the focus is on how the South Bronx and its community emerge from it. What can be said with respect to that point is that *Beat Street*, without any doubt, portrays a South Bronx where the “creative explosion” was at its height, but, at the same time, it completely erases what was behind that, that is to say, the long struggle for a collective rebirth that ultimately led to that creative explosion. As hip-hop early photographer Joe Conzo puts it: “[A]ll that turbulence and upheaval was the birth of hip-hop” (Hip-Hop Evolution). This does not mean that *Beat Street* had to show a burning South Bronx, violent gangs and all of that, even if in fact there are some brief and indirect references to those facts. First, in a dialog between Kenny and his friends when one of them says: “No man, Tito wasn’t in a fire. The building was. Landlord torched this building about five times” and then, in a crosstalk between Kenny and Tracy in which he reveals to her that

I had an older brother. He was in this big gang in the Bronx. He was into some bad shit. When the cops came down on them a lot of guys got wasted and Franklyn was one of them. I was 12 years old, and I was mad. I wanted to go to war. But my friends told me that that was stupid. Anyway, gangs died out back then.

However, it can be noticed that, within the overall narrative developed during the movie, these references appear as something distant, totally unrelated to the cultural rebirth

that is being shown. It is clear that the focus of *Beat Street* and of all the similar movies above mentioned was not that of showing to a broad audience the story of how it was possible that from a burned-out place like the South Bronx a culture with a worldwide appeal was able to emerge. The idea, instead, was probably to transform that story into something bright and suitable for all kind of viewers (albeit, at the time, the film was rated P.G.⁸ because of some strong language). In *Beat Street*, in fact, even the most emotional moment, Ramo's death, seems to set the stage for musical performance, the last big concert of the finale. On one hand this movie structure is typical of music-driven films, but on the other, it is also true that while in *The Get Down* music is the major instrument used to ultimately portray the neighborhood, in *Beat Street* the performances (especially the breakdancing battles) are the true protagonist of the movie while the South Bronx is just the setting for this creative explosion. It probably might be said, then, that here the "creative explosion" is over-represented.

It is interesting to examine why such a dichotomic representation took place; were the breaksploitation movies a response to the apocalyptic and violent movies that approximately during the same years depicted the South Bronx as a dehumanized place? Were they seen as a way to rehabilitate the community or were they just a trivialization for the masses? It seems that, having in mind what I said about *Beat Street*, the answers to these questions can embrace both sides of the coin. On one side the dignity of the community can be seen, for instance, in the figure of Kenny and Lee's mother, a strong woman who has survived the sorrow of having lost a son (and probably her husband) and who lovingly continues to lovingly take care of her kids. An example of that is when she goes to jail to release her little son Lee who was arrested for breakdancing in a public space. On that occasion she says to the guard: "If you're gonna arrest people for dancing maybe you're the one who needs some advice 'cause there are lots of worse things these kids could be doing than dancing". In this scene she strengthens her

⁸ PG means "Parental Guidance Suggested"

maternal role, but she also acts as a speaker for a community that is alive and does not surrender to police abuse of power and gang violence. In addition, the choice of using real exponents of hip-hop culture can be seen not only as a necessity, but also as a way to rehabilitate a community by offering a public recognition of its excellences. On the other side, however, as I have already pointed out, the overall image that comes out from this movie is sugarcoated for the masses, and this can be interpreted both as an inevitable collateral effect of being part of the Hollywood system, but also as a way to forget the painful and complex history of a region that was perceived as an American failure, by highlighting only its best “products” and absorbing them in the dominant narrative.

In the attempt to show on the big screen the unique artistic expressions that were developing in the Bronx on the big screen, *Wild Style* of 1983, directed by Charlie Ahearn, can be considered as a linking bridge between the sugarcoated *Beat Street* and the reality of the neighborhood. In fact, it was the precursor of the Hollywood-made breaksploitation movies of which the above mentioned *Beat Street* is an example. Although it was produced only thanks to a major investment by two European television networks who believed in the project, this movie is considered today as a milestone for the impact it had in raising awareness about the early hip-hop scene and for the importance that its soundtrack had for future rap artists. Nas, for example, sampled a dialog between Ray, the graffiti writer protagonist of the movie and interpreted by the real writer Lee Quinoñes and his brother Hector, a veteran, in the opening skit titled *The Genesis* of his seminal album *Illmatic* of 1994:

Hector: And you're sitting at home doing this shit. I should be earning a medal for this. Stop fuckin' around and be a man! There ain't nothin' out here for you.

Ray: Oh yes, there is... This.

The song then continues with the beat by D.J. Grand Wizard Theodore titled “Subway Theme”, also taken from the movie. As Adilifu Nama states: “*Wild Style* is to hip-hop what

Charlie “Yard Bird” Parker’s “Cherokee” is to bebop” (14) and Nas himself defines it “The Bible” (231). What makes it the linking bridge between the neighborhood and the breaksploitation movies is not only its temporal antecedence, but also the fact that the actors here are real artists such as Lee Quinoñes, Andrew Witten a.k.a. Zephyr, Fab 5 Freddy, Grandmaster Flash, Busy Bee, Cold Crush Brothers, The Fantastic Five⁹, Rock Steady Crew but also ordinary people. In fact, unlike *Beat Street*, this movie can be considered partially as a sort of documentary of the emerging cultural scene of the Bronx. Charlie Ahearn once declared that “[they] were on this sort of narrow razor edge of trying to walk the line between trying to create something that was a kind of fictional pop, sort of Bruce Lee style move, and trying to document real things with real people” (YouTube.com). So, this film positions itself between narrative and documentaries. The plot follows basically the story of a graffiti writer named Ray, a.k.a. “Zoro”. He has a complicated relationship with his girlfriend Rose, another graffiti writer, and also a complicated personal identity, split between Ray and his alter ego Zoro, a mysterious writer that no one really knows. His meeting with a journalist, Virginia (Patti Astor), helps him connect his street art with some rich gallery owners in Manhattan. The end of the movie, again, is a long show in a venue all painted by Zoro himself. Even if he is not performing in the final scene, Zoro is still the protagonist, the mastermind who with his art, makes everything possible and observes the show from the arch above the stage.

⁹ It is interesting to know that The Cold Crush Brothers and The Fantastic Five, both appearing in *Wild Style*, were enemies in reality. In the movie, their rivalry is displayed in the throwdown at the basketball court.



The representation of the South Bronx of the early 80's (the film was shot between 1979 and 1981), can be understood by taking into consideration three scenes of this movie.

First of all, following a chronological order the first scene is Virginia's arrival in the South Bronx. The scene is introduced by the song *Pretty Baby* by Blondie¹⁰. It is a song that increases a sense of separation between these two worlds because the lyrics says:

Pretty baby, you look so heavenly
A neo-nebular from under the sun
Eyes that tell me incense and peppermints
Your looks are larger than life, long live innocence
Petite ingenue, I fell in love with you

The contrast is underlined both by the lyrics and by the images themselves. The blond journalist, while driving her fancy car appears self-confident, but her expression changes little by little as soon as she enters the South Bronx. She, a "petite ingenue", in her arrival in the neighborhood, is the embodiment not only of the physical distance between Manhattan and the Bronx, but also of an existing emotional distance. Everything becomes even more evident when her car suddenly stops in the middle of the South Bronx and some African American kids offer to help her out. She reacts terrified: "All right, now you kids don't touch this car, I'm calling the cops, I'm not kidding", revealing the prejudice that just because they lived in

¹⁰ Blondie were considered superstars at the time, and the fact that in 1981 they released a song, titled *Rapture*, featuring rap and about Grandmaster Flash and Fab 5 Freddy, helped increasing the fame of hip-hop. It was the first No.1 song in the U.S. to feature rap (Hip-Hop Evolution).

that area they had to be poor and ill-disposed. She then asks where she could find a call box and the kids tell her that the first working telephone is eight blocks away from there. In this scene there are three elements that emerge related to the representation of the South Bronx: first of all, the already mentioned bias that at the time was shared by basically everyone who was not from there. Second, the fact that institutions, or at least the public administration, were accomplices in the creation of a stereotyped South Bronx (the absence of the call box is a symbol for the lack of services in the area). Third, the reaction of the kids that push the car until it arrives at its destination is a way to show that, despite living in a place neglected and rejected (looked upon with disgust) by everyone, they still maintain a sense of community that has been absent for example in the character of Virginia at least until that moment.



The second scene which, even if indirectly, helps define the portrayal of the neighborhood and its people is when Zoro is at a gala in Manhattan, hosted by a wealthy patron. Here the graffiti artist says to the host:

You got a fantastic view over here. You know, I only see this in comic books and now I'm standing here watching the whole world at my feet. I feel like God almost! I would love to make a painting of this view.

Again, as we will also see in *The Get Down*, the South Bronx is implicitly compared to Manhattan. Manhattan's view appears as something beautiful, but only in its surface; its

skyline at night is impressive, but there is no vitality, it is only make believe. This idea is conveyed both by the surreal dialog about graffiti at the gala between Zoro and an old and perplexed man and by the long framing of the Manhattan skyline, which is static and resembles more a fake mental projection than a real place.



The third scene that deserves to be mentioned in order to analyze the representation of the South Bronx in *Wild Style* is Zoro's journey on the train from his neighborhood to a place where he is supposed to paint a wall together with Rose. On the coaches of the train one can read a huge graffiti phrase that says "Criminals Invading Again". The train is empty, apart from Zoro. Thus, it can be implied that the criminal on the train is in fact the protagonist himself. He is taking the train to go out of the South Bronx and this symbolizes the fact that people from that neighborhood were perceived by "high-ranking" society as enemies, very likely "peace-breakers" of the public order. This is, in fact, what Zoro himself acknowledges when he defines the act of writing graffiti as an activity for which you are insulted by "passengers, cops, your friends, your mom". In the same way, the kids that had helped Virginia earlier in the film, said: "We're ALL graffiti writers!" in unison. This means that even if society labels graffiti writers as criminals, they are presented as the creative voice of a neighborhood no one cares about. They are accepted by the neighborhood more than all the "stranger" people who try to change a culture without even making the effort to understand it.

In addition, there is another element that deserves to be highlighted in this scene, that is, the song that accompanies Zoro's ride on the train, *South Bronx Subway Rap* by Grandmaster Caz:

Look past the garbage over the trains
Under the ruins though the remains
Around the crime and pollution
And tell me where do I fit in?
South Bronx New York that's where I dwell
To a lot of people it's a living hell
Full of frustration and poverty
But wait that's not how it looks to me
It's a challenge and opportunity
To rise above the state of debris

These lyrics depict a South Bronx that is re-emerging after terrible years and, although “[t]o a lot of people is a living hell”, especially to those seeing it from outside and influenced by the media, the neighborhood is both a “challenge and opportunity”. Zoro is alone while this song is being played as well as its community, that is alone in its struggle to emerge. For this reason, the success that is coming under the form of rap music, paintings or dance, is possible only thanks to this community's strengths. The rehabilitation of the South Bronx, its “creative explosion” is conveyed in *Wild Style* in a way that is more connected “to the streets”. One reason for that is the fact that, as I said, it can be considered as a sort of docufilm, but also the fact that it did not have to follow Hollywood's rules of production. Instead, it was thought by Ahearn and Fred Brathwaite (Fab 5 Freddy) as “a way to talk about the whole explosion in hip-hop that was about to happen” (NYTimes.com) and the idea came precisely from two men that were personally involved in the cultural ferment of New York City at that time.

In the end, it is true that both *Beat Street* and *Wild Style* aimed to represent the cultural explosion of the South Bronx during late 70's and early 80's. However, if we consider them

within the overall filmic narrative that derived from those particular years, it can be said that *Wild Style* too is a movie which is almost exclusively devoted to the representation of the cultural explosion and the artistic potentiality that were starting to see the light at the time. As Ahearn himself remembers: “This film was a projection of our dreams. [...] It was our wildest dream of what could happen” (NYTimes.com). As a consequence, it should not be considered as a way to show the South Bronx on the big screen, but instead as a way to pay homage to the emerging hip-hop culture. It is for this reason that the focus of the film was not necessarily about an explanation of the history and the evolution of the neighborhood up to that creative point. Neither it was about an analysis of the kaleidoscope of experiences that the community had to live through during those years.

3.4 CONCLUSION

During the two decades, the 70’s and the 80’s, the Bronx and the South Bronx started to be represented on the big screen as a unique spatial entity where something was happening, at first in a negative sense and later in a positive one. The movies were the “amplifiers” of a reality that soon became an experience shared all-around the world.

For this reason, I thought that it was important to retrace its dichotomous portrayals, also to show how an overall comprehension of what was going on in the Bronx was (to say the least) complicated. For sure, the movie industry was challenged by the possibility of transposing such a powerful and fascinating history into a motion picture, and the answers were among the most diverse; from the international apocalyptic view of Castellari, to the docufilm of Ahearn and the “kid-friendly” depiction of Lathan, everyone seemed eager to give us his own perspective on that region and its community. However, finding the key to give an all-embracing representation of the South Bronx was maybe too hard for the time and only a

more detached view could reach the goal of showing both the “nihilistic implosion” and the “creative explosion”. This has been the case of the tv series *The Get Down*, which will be analyzed in the following pages.

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CHAPTER 4

THE SOUTH BRONX IN *THE GET DOWN*

The image of the South Bronx I tried to portray in Chapter 1, also emerges in the 2016 Netflix series *The Get Down* which was released in its first part on August 12, 2016. This is a proof of how, after more than thirty years, the history of this neighborhood and of its creative manifestations is still fascinating and not yet explored in all of its nuances. In addition, this proves that not only is hip-hop culture a topic that can have a broad audience, but that it is also still a billion-dollar business in which money can be invested.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The Get Down is a music-driven drama tv series broadcast by Netflix and produced by Sony Pictures Tv. Not only is it, to date, Netflix's most expensive tv series ever, but it is also the first case in which this online channel has not released the entire season in one time only. For this reason, just six episodes are available so far out of the scheduled twelve, which constitute the so called "Part 1" of this tv series. Apparently, according to one of the co-creators (along with the already mentioned Baz Luhrmann), the Pulitzer Prize for Drama winner Stephen Adly Guirgis¹¹, this division happened thanks to the producers, who "wanted to get something on the air" after two-and-a-half years of production. As a consequence, one might be tempted to ask: "Why do you feel the need to analyze a tv series that is not over yet?" So an introduction must be added; despite the fact that this dissertation takes into account a tv series that is formally incomplete, I believe that this does not affect the development of my work for three essential reasons. First of all, the main stories narrated throughout the six

¹¹ Stephen Adly Guirgis won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for his play *Between Riverside and Crazy*. To have more information see <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0012289/>.

episodes come to a (temporary) end in the last episode and, probably even more important, this first part touches upon plenty of themes, enough for the development of my dissertation. Second, *The Get Down* is a litmus test to analyze more broadly how a peculiar period in the history of music and in New York City local history has been treated on screen, so six episodes can be considered enough to draw conclusions and make comparisons. To be honest, the pilot episode already offers sufficient cues to prove my arguments. Third, these six episodes can be considered as a six-hour long movie. The pilot in particular, the one I am going to analyze more in depth, could be considered as a 1 hour and 30 minutes-long movie in itself. This is a characteristic that is more and more common in today's tv series, especially on Netflix where all the seasons are released in one (or two) times only and can be watched as a long movie with no interruptions and no waiting time between the episodes. Netflix tv series are conceived to be watched as fast as possible, satisfying the viewer's wishes and the time available. The idea behind this process is called "binge-watching", which is an informal way of expressing the attitude of "[w]atch(-ing) multiple episodes of (a television program) in rapid succession" (Oxford Dictionaries).

So, in order to introduce the analysis of *The Get Down*, it could be useful to briefly retrace the evolution of tv series and their increasing relevance in today's television landscape. This process helps us to understand why the release of a series like *The Get Down* can be considered as a big event today and why, for example, Netflix decided to spend around 120 million (so far) on this project and decided to hire a well-known film director to realize it.

The Get Down clearly constitutes one of the latest and brightest examples of that wave of "quality tv" that appeared in the U.S. starting from the 1990s (Fuller, 1), in particular thanks to *The Sopranos*, a crime drama tv series produced by H.B.O. (Home Box Office Inc.) from 1999 to 2007. As Alan Sepinwall states: "[T]he 21st century slowly saw the extinction of the middle-class movie. If a film couldn't either be made on the cheap or guarantee an opening

weekend of \$50 million or more, it was out". As a consequence, in a moment of audience uncertainty in the movie business, TV stepped in to fill that void (Sepinwall, Introduction). A major actor in that reversal was H.B.O. First conceived by cable entrepreneur Charles Dolan in 1971 as the *Green Channel*, H.B.O. was a subscription television. It was a different way of approaching viewers made possible by the *1968 Fourth Report and Order* issued by the Federal Communications Commission that liberalized the telecommunication sector. The divide was marked after 1975, when satellites and cable reinvented the system and H.B.O. subscriptions grew from 15000 to 287199 in 1976 alone. The outstanding growth of this cable channel, opened the way for the birth of a series of cable channels during the late 1970s and early 1980s (CNN, ESPN, BET, MTV among the most successful). Cable began to be considered as a valid alternative by American viewers. The final step was H.B.O. C.E.O. Gerald Levin's idea of combining cable and satellite; after that, cable reached 63.4% penetration in U.S. in 1994. In the meanwhile, the invention of new devices such as the remote control, contributed to a further transition from broadcasting to narrowcasting. The search for a more specific audience led to the development of original productions tailored on the consumers tastes; "made-to-order series by a new generation of creative writers-producers replaced the two-decade-long dominance of Hollywood's cookie-cutter mode of telefilm production" (Edgerton, 1-18). In this thriving market conditioned by the development of the Internet, H.B.O. distinguished itself as a high-quality series producer, "the tv equivalent of a designer label". Presenting itself as a subscription television, H.B.O. was free from direct rating pressure and able to invest its money in the most talented employees available. Basically, H.B.O. raised the bar for quality television (Edgerton, 1-18). This was a somewhat obligatory step for H.B.O.; in order to keep subscriptions, this cable channel had to give viewers a reason to keep watching, and the reason was high quality (Akass and McCabe, 84).

The online channel Netflix was born in 1997 thanks to Reed Hastings and software executive Marc Randolph. It started as an online movie rental, but the turning point was in 2007, when Netflix responded to the worldwide crisis of DVD offering a streaming service, which allowed members to instantly watch television shows and movies on their personal computers. In 2010 it became the most used website in the night time slot in the U.S. and it decided to open its market to foreign countries, Canada first. Another turning point year, for which it can be considered as H.B.O.'s main competitor in the delivery of quality products, is 2013, when Netflix launched its first self-commissioned original content series, *House of Cards*, starring Academy Award-winner Kevin Spacey. From that moment on, also encouraged by the wide success in terms of viewers and critics of *House of Card* first season, Netflix started to invest more in original programming. Following what H.B.O. was already doing in the CATV (Cable Tv) sector, Netflix introduced the concept of "quality television" into online streaming to the extent that in 2016 it is releasing an estimate of 126 original series or films. Despite targeting a different market (at least until the landing of H.B.O. in the sector of online streaming with the launch of 'H.B.O. Go'), this streaming channel has been able to offer a real and valid alternative in the realm of high quality original content with a confirmation in terms of subscriptions that led Reed Hastings to plan for 2017 a six billion investment in original content (Forbes). The relevance of Netflix has also been recognized officially, since in July of 2013, history was made when it received 14 Primetime Emmy nominations, becoming the first content provider that wasn't an on-air network to be recognized by the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences (Bustle). Since then, Netflix nominations and prizes have increased every year and in 2016 Netflix scored its personal best with 9 Emmys won. Yet, it is not just about prizes; speaking more in general, this online streaming service helped maintain the bar of production values at a very high level, to an extent that nowadays famous Hollywood actors and directors compete in a ruthless way to be

part of a tv series. In a market of viewers which is increasingly divided into little niches with peculiar tastes, are original tv series threatening the historical leadership of cinema as the most relevant visual medium? It has been an ongoing debate at least since 2013, when writer and tv producer David Cox wrote an article on *The Guardian* titled “10 reasons today's movies trump TV” to which, two days later, on the same newspaper, Stuart Heritage answered with a piece titled “10 reasons why today's TV is better than movies.” The debate is still open and recent tv series such as *The Get Down* or H.B.O.’s *Westworld* seem to complicate the issue even more. What cannot be denied is that high quality tv series nowadays attract the best writers, directors and actors on the scene. Actors who would have despised television a decade ago are now embracing it precisely because the quality is so high (The Guardian). For all these reasons, high quality tv series today deserve to be studied, analyzed, and considered on the same level as movies.

4.2 LUHRMANN’S SIGNATURE STYLE

This chapter analyzes *The Get Down* with the aim of giving the necessary base to assimilate this recent work in the overall narrative about the South Bronx that, as we have already seen, is a narrative that was fostered particularly during the late ‘70s and early 80’s. However, an analysis of *The Get Down* cannot leave out of consideration his main creator, the Australian Mark Anthony “Baz” Luhrmann and his peculiar filmic style. I listed some of his most notable works in the introduction, but in this paragraph, a deeper look into his signature style is provided. His overall production is quite limited, since in 24 years he has directed only 5 full-length films plus a series of short films. This artistic behavior acquires more sense knowing that, for example, he worked a decade on the *The Get Down* and it took almost two years to shoot the series because, as Luhrmann himself declared, “[t]here’s always something

starting while you're finishing something" (Entertainment Weekly). His first three movies are part of a trilogy called by the author *Red Curtain Trilogy*; it consists of *Strictly Ballroom* of 1992, *Romeo + Juliet* of 1996 and *Moulin Rouge!* of 2001. It is not a trilogy *strictu sensu* because there is no consequentiality in time and plot between the movies. Instead, as Luhrmann himself states, the link lies in the role he decided to give to theatrical conventions in these movies; dancing in *Strictly Ballroom*, poetry and language in *Romeo + Juliet* and singing in *Moulin Rouge!*. In fact, the *Red Curtain Trilogy* already clearly expresses Luhrmann's signature style; what emerges is a passion for musicals as well as epic and he himself declared: "My next great passion after musicals is the epic; telling a recognizable universal story using a vast canvas of a far away place and historical events" (CNN.com), in a 2010 quote that with hindsight seems to explain Luhrmann's work *The Get Down*, an ambitious project that merges both and that encompasses all of the theatrical conventions above mentioned; from dancing with the breakdancing style to poetry and singing with rap lyrics. Throughout his career, he has developed a painstaking interest in the visual effect of his works from colorful costumes and sumptuous backgrounds to hectic editing and ethereal framings. He possesses a distinctive style and for this reason can be considered not only a director but also an *auteur* following the explanation of the auteur theory, formerly theorized in France in late 1940s by André Bazin and Alexandre Astruc and paraphrased by distinguished American film critic Andrew Sarris that states:

Over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature. The way a film looks and moves should have some relationship to the way a director thinks and feels. (1-8)

Professor Fincina Hopgood, in addition, goes even beyond this idea and affirms that not only can Luhrmann's work be considered within the *auteur* theory, but it is also *post-authorial*, as with the creation of the expression *Red Curtain Trilogy* to define his own movies, the director self-promotes and directly engages with cinema scholarship (53-54). These recurrent

characteristics can be found in Luhrmann's works which are identified by a very theatrical way of filming, a particular attention to the ancient forms of art such as dance, music and poetry, a desire of visually pleasing the viewer and an unusual approach to the transposition of the plot. In fact, Luhrmann's stories are simple, playing in a continuous interaction between their visual representation and the plain story; the plot draws strength from its visuality and vice versa, that is, its visuality is highlighted by the plot. He portrays a sort of heightened reality, which uses the real historical period in which is set to represent events that acquire the contour of a universal and mythological story. This appears to be true for the *Red Curtain Trilogy* as well as for his latest full-length movie, *The Great Gatsby* of 2013. His way of intertwining reality and myth, always through the lens of his own personal perceptions has often been received in an ambivalent way by audiences and, above all, critics. Examples of this "slacklining" happened after *The Great Gatsby* premiere at the Cannes Festival, where no one clapped during the end credits, but it also happened for *Moulin Rouge!*, which received criticism even if it won two Academy Awards (Best Costume Design and Best Production Design) and three Golden Globes (Best Motion Picture, Best Actor and best Original Score in the 'Musical or Comedy' section). Luhrmann clearly is a director that does not leave anyone indifferent to his continuous search for the limit, redundancy rather than dryness, surprise rather than predictability. Toward this direction also goes his unusual use of music during his movies; evidence of that is the fact that Luhrmann chose hip-hop superstar Jay Z as main producer for *The Great Gatsby*'s soundtrack, creating a blatant contrast between the original story that is set in the 20's, the Golden Age of jazz music, and its transposition with a contemporary hip-hop soundtrack. This trick serves to increase a sense of decontextualization/contextualization of the story, contributing to convey the perception of being in front of a universal, epic story that is well-defined in time and place, but that goes beyond that and earn value standing on its own. There is also another element, though, that

can be inferred by this peculiar choice, that is, Luhrmann's fascination for hip-hop culture and history as a form of art that started from people who had nothing but their voice and wanted to be heard. The fascination of a middle-aged, white, Australian man for hip-hop culture is in itself paradigmatic of the worldwide significance that this movement has achieved over the years.

I tried to briefly introduce Baz Luhrmann's characteristics in order to provide the distinctive traits of the mastermind behind the project of *The Get Down*. I also have to admit that a deeper analysis of his past works falls outside the purpose of this dissertation and, moreover, belongs to the field of Australian cinema studies, rather than North American cinema. However, throughout the analysis of *The Get Down*, further comparisons with previous works by the auteur will be made. Another of his characteristics as a director for example, that is, his desire to be constantly surrounded by a competent team, helps me to introduce the series. According to Pam Cook, indeed, also thanks to his background in theatre,

[Luhrmann] likens his functions to that of a ship's captain, responsible for initiating the journey or project. Once the other participants come on board, then each of them has a vital part to play in bringing the ship home, but it is up to the captain to keep it on course and not lose sight of the initial purpose [maintaining his clear authorial touch]. (18)

This approach has proven to be extremely useful in the realization of *The Get Down* for two main reasons: first, the tv series is about an environment which was not a part of Luhrmann's personal background, so above all, for a story that is so geographically rooted and, at least in its early years, insular, he needed people who had lived the real atmosphere of the period and who knew the neighborhood. Second, his way of proceeding perfectly fits a longer and dilated format like that of a tv series. The result is that, apart from the already mentioned Pulitzer-Prize winner Guirgis, on one side he collaborated with Nasir Jones, a.k.a. Nas, Nelson George and Grandmaster Flash and on the other side with other directors, namely Ed Bianchi (Episodes 2, 4, 6), Andrew Bernstein (Episode 3) and Michael Dinner (Episode 5). In

particular, Luhrmann's collaboration with hip-hop legends such as Nas and Grandmster Flash is peculiar of his commitment and interest, extemporaneous but extremely accurate in details at the same time. Nelson George himself, author among other things, of *Hip-hop America* and considered to be a living encyclopedia for black music, in talking about Luhrmann stated: "People don't understand how much factual information and research is done in all of his work. It's deep." (IndieWire.com). The presence of Nas, who also wrote and rapped rhymes that the adult version of the protagonist played by Daveed Diggs then lip-synced, although born in Queens, is also another crown jewels in the team and serves as an example of how the "baton" has been passed and the teachings of hip-hop pioneers have been filtered in a more contemporary mode. In addition, Luhrmann's choice of collaborators includes artists such as hip-hop godfathers D.J. Kool Herc, Afrika Baambataa and Kurtis Blow and graffiti writers Aaron Thomas and former writer Seth Rosenfeld. This need to be surrounded by local people also shows how this story and the history of the South Bronx in that period cannot ignore the fact that it was a story deeply rooted in the community, in an abandoned place where, despite the turmoil, bonds grew strong and constituted a value that must be considered when addressing this topic. *The Get Down* starts right from this assumption and in the attempt of telling the story of the birth of hip-hop and of the South Bronx – a binomial that cannot be divided – it goes right into the lives of young, ordinary, guys that try to escape from the ruins and desolation surrounding them, elevating their souls by friendship, love and, of course, music.

4.3 “WHERE THERE IS RUIN, THERE IS HOPE FOR A TREASURE”: AN ANALYSIS OF *THE GET DOWN*

So, *The Get Down* melts fiction and non-fiction and also maintains in itself the generic conventions of the musical genre, that is, “a romantic plot interspersed with number of communal performances” (Monteyne, 85). It is the story of a half-black and half-Puerto Rican teenage high-school student named Ezekiel Figuero, nicknamed Zeke and M.C. Books on stage, and his group of friends, Ra-Ra Kipling, Marcus “Dizzee” Kipling, Boo-Boo Kipling and from the end of the first episode, Shaolin Fantastic. Together they face everyday life in the South Bronx of 1977, which means school and parties but also dealing with gangs and organized crime that, and we have seen this in Chapter 2, were still an infamous characteristic of some neighborhoods of New York City, the South Bronx area above all. Zeke is trying to split his time between his friends and the girl he is in love with, Mylene Cruz. With both his friends and Mylene he shares a deep passion for music; he soon discovers his great ability as an M.C. (Master of Ceremonies), that is, the art of creating rhymes on a beat spun by a D.J. and practices it with his friends with whom he assembles The Get Down Brothers group, under the supervision of Grandmaster Flash in person. With Mylene, instead, he shares the stage of the Pentecostal church where Mylene’s father is the preacher and where Mylene used to sing accompanied by Zeke playing the piano. In parallel with his love for music, Zeke also develops an interest in politics, thanks to the support of his teacher Ms. Green who sees his above-average qualities in writing and to Francisco “Papa Fuerte” Cruz, Mylene’s uncle, a politician who tries to raise the voice of the South Bronx residents, providing them with what the government is failing to provide and fighting on their behalf against the City administration’s “benign neglect”. He gives Ezekiel an opportunity and so the young guy has to decide whether to be a point of reference, a voice of the neighborhood, in a creative way with his rhymes or in an institutionalized one with his “rigid” words. In the end, he chooses

to represent both; he speaks on the podium to support Ed Koch's¹² candidacy as mayor of New York City during a meeting in the South Bronx and then as soon as he stopped talking he leaves the stage to join his friends, The Get Down Brothers in a rap battle against another group, The Notorious III.

In the following pages, I am going to analyze the representation of the South Bronx as it emerges in Luhrmann's work *The Get Down*. The analysis will be developed taking into consideration the scenic transposition of the neighborhood from a visual, thematic and symbolic point of view along the same lines as seen in Chapter 3. The focus will be mainly on Episode 1 because it is the episode that contains in itself all of the elements presented in the tv series, it is the most cinematographic among the six episodes and it is the only one really directed by Luhrmann. The Bronx, and the South Bronx in particular, is the real protagonist of this tv series along with hip-hop culture. For this reason, this work considers how all the elements that constitute the community, both related to institutional and day-to-day life, are portrayed on screen. This means basically that, following what has been said in the previous chapters, the image of the South Bronx will be evaluated taking into account how the physical composition of the neighborhood, its history and development, its relationship with institutions, the role of gangs and the bonds between Puerto Ricans and African-Americans turn up. The symbolic representation, instead, derives from how the plot is organized and what the characters do and mean.

The first element to notice is the title of each episode. "Where There Is Ruin, There Is Hope for a Treasure" is the title of the first episode developed by Guirgis and Luhrmann, directed by the latter and teleplayed with the help of Seth Rosenfeld. Then, each episode's title is developed following a similar dichotomy. The first, however, is the title that gives a

¹² Ed Koch was the mayor of New York City from 1977 to 1989. He first won the Democratic primary in September 1977 and then he defeated the Liberal Party's candidate Mario Cuomo.

meaning to the whole series with its juxtaposition between “ruin” on one side and “hope” on the other. It expresses the essence of a place that was first associated with a hopeless hellhole for humanity and then it became a place able to show its treasures and its strength, artistically speaking, to the world.

The first episode starts (and ends) with an establishing shot of the Statue of Liberty illuminating New York City at night. A caption gives immediately the basic information about time and place: it is New York City in 1996. The aerial shot then descends and enters in an indoor arena which, as we discover from an overhead shot, is the legendary Madison Square Garden where a large crowd is having fun at a concert of a rapper, who thanks to a brief framing of an all-access pass, we realize is called M.C. Books. His lyrics introduce the viewers to the story that is about to be narrated. It is the story of his life as a young adult in the South Bronx of 1977. Real archive videos appear on screen while Books is rapping, visually characterizing his words and giving them a real value for the viewers. His fictional story is the pretext to tell something bigger, that is the real history of the South Bronx of the 70's. His original lyrics, written and rapped by Nas, introduce the viewers to this real story:

Let's take a trip back
Back into time
1977
It was maximum crime
The president neglected us [...]
Six powerful men put New York through some drastic times [...]
And which borough suffered the most?
Where I'm from, the Bronx
We had to rumble with rivals on the rubble
While buildings around us would crumble [...]
I see the light is right there
At the end of the tunnel

I needed some kind of hope to fill me up [...]

The first two minutes already give us numerous hints to understand the series. The Statue of Liberty in the beginning, which is geographically located on Liberty Island, is elevated as a symbolic final destination, as if the series is organized in a circular way, in which everyone aspires to be back there, where freedom lies. The Statue is far from Manhattan, but it is even farther from the South Bronx, which is located exactly on the opposite side of the city; you cannot see the Statue from the Bronx, but you can see it from Manhattan. The meaning is that the ideal path to the American Dream is full of obstacles and barriers if you live on the other side of the city and, implicitly, Manhattan seems to be a better spot to pursue that Dream. M.C. Books has been able to reach that part of the city thanks to his talent in music, but in his lyrics he proudly reaffirms his origins, highlighting a tie with his home neighborhood that is restated throughout the whole series. An example is one of the last scenes of Episode 6, when, while talking to Mylene in front of a quiet and dark skyline he says: “The Bronx is better. We got everything they got in Manhattan. Plus, we can sit here and enjoy the beautiful view of them.” An unmistakable juxtaposition emerges between Manhattan, at the beginning as well as in the end dark and artificially illuminated (and when in daylight, full of indifferent and robotlike people) and the South Bronx depicted by Books, which is imperfect, but bright and full of life at the same time (evidence of that is the symbolic scene of a flying pigeon on the top of a roof, a flash-forward from Episode 2). Also, in his declaration as a proud son of the Bronx, M.C. Books shows another important feature, that is, the fact that rap music is characterized by a strong sense of belonging, an indissoluble bond with the “turf” and the community. This peculiarity can be traced back to the particular conditions of the South Bronx itself before rap emerged; as I explained in Chapter 2, various gangs dominated the streets of New York City and contributed to create a sense of belonging which was very geographically focused. In fact, the defense of your own block or neighborhood, is one of the main reasons gangs formed in the first place. With the decline of gangs, the passage from “nihilistic

implosion” to “creative explosion”, many former gang members moved their energy from gang banging to music (like for example the already mentioned Afrika Bambaataa), always maintaining their strong link to the neighborhood (or just, “the hood” as it is often referred to in hip-hop lyrics) reaffirmed during parties and in song lyrics. Real examples are the so called *Bridge Wars*, a hip-hop rivalry during the mid-to-late 80’s and early 90’s about the real birthplace of hip-hop. In 1985 Queens-based Marley Marl & M.C. Shan wrote the song *The Bridge* where they rapped:

You love to hear the story, again and again,
Of how it all got started way back when,
The monument is right in your face,
Sit and listen for a while to the name of the place,
The Bridge,
Queensbridge

The reply by the Bronx-based group “Boogie-Down Production” in 1986 was the song titled *South Bronx* in which the rapper KRS-One says:

So you think that hip-hop had its start out in Queensbridge
If you pop that junk up in the Bronx you might not live
Cause you're in
South Bronx, the South South Bronx

In the first two minutes of *The Get Down*, in the comparison between Manhattan and the Bronx and in Books’ claim “[w]here I’m from, the Bronx” emerges all of that and the representation of the neighborhood is enriched by the link between music and place. The spatial connotation is crucial from the beginning of the series and this is necessary since hip-hop culture of the dawn, as we have seen, was a movement deeply rooted in the local community. In Luhrmann’s perfect style, however, this representation assumes the strength of an epic and timeless story; the director uses various expedients to convey this sense of epic, the first of which is personified in the figure of Shaolin Fantastic:

My savior
Free-spirited
No man braver
He was honored and gifted
His name was Shaolin Fantastic
The lady-killing romantic

The first scene in the long flashback that starts with Books lyrics is that of a train on an elevated railway which carries a phrase, the episode's title, under the form of wild-style graffiti. The train, as we have partially seen in the previous chapter, has a deep symbolic value in the portrayal of the neighborhood. There is a train going through the Bronx basically in every movie set there, but here in particular, as well as in *Beat Street*, it has the role of messenger. The titles written on the coaches have a meaning of hope that can reach every part of the city. Graffiti writing on trains becomes a statement, a way to show to the world that "neglected us" the existence of a new generations of young adults that did not accept the constraints imposed by the society of the time. It is an anticipation of what will soon happen with rap; words will overcome the neighborhood's boundaries to achieve recognition even on the other part of the city. It is no coincidence that one of the most famous rap song ever by Grandmaster flash & Furious Five is called *The Message*. That song came out with the aim of retaking hip-hop from the success of the SugarHill Gang, seen as a usurper of the true value of that music because they were from the "muffled" state of New Jersey (Latitudine Soul). *The Message* was a message not only to them, but also to the rest of the city, as if to say "we're here, we exist and this is what we are living right under your rich nose". In fact, the lyrics, that finally transformed rap "into an art form with the power of a colossus" (Serrano, 33), say:

It's like a jungle sometimes
It makes me wonder how I keep from goin' under
Broken glass everywhere
People pissin' on the stairs, you know they just don't care

I can't take the smell, can't take the noise
Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice
Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat
I tried to get away but I couldn't get far
Cause a man with a tow truck repossessed my car

In Zeke's crew, one of his friends, Dizzee, is a graffiti writer under the pseudonym of *Rumi 141* and represents the visual power of hip-hop culture and a link to the tradition of writing that changed the cityscape of major American cities. Its devotion for the works of Shaolin Fantastic, who used to be a famous writer under the name of Shao 007, contributes to give Shaolin this sort of epic aura. The end of the scene, developed as a sort of bridging shot, is even more defined in time and place; after a panning shot over what appears to be a scale model of New York City, the setting becomes real with a framing of a complex of popular houses, built following the already mentioned model of the "towers in the park" where, in "Apartment 16G", Zeke lives with his aunt and his aunt's boyfriend. In this new scene, the young Ezekiel is writing a poem for Mylene, looking out through the window toward the city's skyline in search for inspiration. The city in itself appears as a muse and is presented as an inspiration also at the end of the first episode, when the group of friends, while admiring the dark skyline, decide to form the Fantastic Four Plus One crew (a name that evokes the real groups Funky Four Plus One and The Fantastic Five). Another indication about the time of the story is added when Zeke's stepfather Leon tells the boy: "Enjoy your last day of school, 'cause come summertime, I'll make a working man out of that ass". An aerial shot introduces the viewer to another important place in the neighborhood, the Pentecostal church "Iglesia de Dios Imaculado", where Mylene used to sing. Pentecostalism was very widespread in the Bronx, especially thanks to the Puerto Rican community. In particular, its emphasizing of faith healing explains part of Mylene's father devotion, since we soon discover that he is seeking

redemption from an obscure past. Then, the scene moves again to another relevant place for the neighborhood, the “Kipling’s Interstellar Barber Shop”, that is, the place where the Kipling family is working. It is no coincidence that Luhrmann and his staff chose to represent an African-American family involved in the barber shop business; from James Thomas - who had become a successful barber shop owner in the Tennessee of XIX century, and above all, “the first black person in the country to gain both freedom and residency” (Mills, 37) onwards - the barber shop has always been a place for the socialization of black males, the sharing of everyday experiences and the creation of stronger identities. African-American writer Ralph Waldo Ellison once wrote:

There is no place like a Negro Barbershop for hearing what Negroes really think. There is more unselfconscious affirmation to be found here on a Saturday than you can find in a Negro College in a month or so it seems to me. (9)

The inclusion of this place is common when representing the African-American world on screen. Just as an example, in the Netflix series’ *Luke Cage* “Pop’s barber shop” is the center of the community and everything gets around it, both bad and good events. In *The Get Down* the relevance of this place is recurring and has a crucial role in Episode 3, when the barber shop becomes the ideal place for an unauthorized party organized by Zeke and the Kipling’s brothers using a rare bootleg by Grandmaster Flash in order to raise some money¹³. This reference to domestic parties is a “homage” to how hip-hop started in the first place; *1520 Sedgwick Avenue*, an apartment building in Morris Heights in the Bronx, in fact, has been officially recognized as the birthplace of hip-hop (NYTimes.com), the place that, thanks to a house party by D.J. Kool Herc on August 11 1973, took that emerging movement to the next level (Chang, 68-72). So, it was a neighborhood-only thing, far from the lights of Manhattan

¹³ Stealing beats and rhymes was considered a terrible crime by the hip-hop community. That is also another reason why The SugarHill Gang was hated in the Bronx: one of its members, Big Bank Hank, was accused of stealing rhymes from Grandmaster Caz (Hip-Hop Evolution).

and of the other boroughs. Anyway, in the same scene, the head of the family, answering to Dizzee challenging line “come on. This ain’t ‘Little House on the Prairie’¹⁴”, says: “[t]hat there is my little house. And this here is my little salon. And that patch of sidewalk, that’s my little prairie. Less than a hundred years ago, the Bronx was all prairie”. This reference underlines three different historical points related to the Bronx: first, it makes a reference to the fact that there was a place in the South Bronx, the 41st precinct (the same of *Fort Apache, The Bronx*), that was really nicknamed that way because two-thirds of the 93,900 people who lived within its boundaries in 1970 had fled (NYTimes.com). Second, it creates a clear separation between a historical experience that belongs to white Americans (the house in the prairie) and an experience of growing up in inner cities that was becoming more and more a prerogative of African-Americans. Third, it recalls the fact that the Bronx for most part of the XIX century was a prairie, or rather, it was not part of the metropolitan area of New York City until the end of the XIX century when the Greater New York area was formed (D’Orsogna, 65-67).

As we will see, the train is the element that links and separates the different scenes; its rattle is a recurring sound throughout the episode, like a reminder of the opportunities the boys have to take before everything slips away. After Mylene’s talk with Zeke where she discloses her plan to go to a night club called *Les Inferno* to give her tape to the famous D.J. Malibu, the scene shifts to a colorful (especially thanks to Mylene and her friends’s dresses) and chaotic scene in the streets of the South Bronx. The sequence ends again with a close-up of a train passing. The next scene, with the rattling train used as a transitional device, is frantically edited and seems to mix archive videos with the actual shots. The characteristics of Luhrmann’s signature style emerge here more evidently than ever. We hear a voice talking

¹⁴ “The Little House on the Prairie” is a series of novels for children written by Laura Ingalls Wilder and based on her childhood in the northern Midwest during the 1870s and 1880s. Its adaptation on the small screen was in the form of a western drama that lasted from 1974 to 1983 and was broadcasted by NBC.

about Shao, adding other features to his mythical figure, “Shaolin was in the yards and saw the dude hot one-ten and so he karate-chopped his ass. Waa taa!” or in Dizze’s words, “his Pumas are always pristine, His hands are samurai swords and his pieces, they’re all fireworks”. Shao is presented as the spearhead, the brightest of all the soldiers (read ‘writers’) that are fighting to find a spot in the world, to be recognized and to raise their voices proudly saying “I was here”. His figure can be compared to the real figure of “Karate” Charlie Suarez, president of the Ghetto Brothers, that became famous in the streets thanks to his ability in martial arts that gave him a sort of invincible aura. Borrowing Yellow Benjy’s words: “Charlie was a warrior. He lived like the Japanese Bushido” (Rubble Kings).

Then Dizze decides to move to Charlotte Street, land (in the series) of the so called “Savage Warlords”, to see Shao’s last piece of art. The evocation of this street opens the lid on another topic, that of youth gangs and the devastation that was happening in the South Bronx at the time. Using the real device of a tv news broadcast within the tv series itself, the director adds other historical elements to better present the neighborhood and the atmosphere of the time; according to the newscaster, graffiti and crime, a common binomial in media depictions at the time, are seen as the same thing and seem two major topics in the upcoming elections for mayor. This, in fact, was the most common connection made by media at the time. The race is between the incumbent Abraham Beame (mayor of N.Y.C. from 1974 to 1977) and Edward “Ed” Koch, the underdog who in the end would become mayor and remain in this position from 1978 to 1989. The juxtaposition between Dizze’s words in the previous scene “but for all of us, when we see our names on these trains, if only even for a fleeting moment we can say: “I was here” and Ed Koch’s words “graffiti and crime plague our streets” is symbolic of the distance between institutions and the residents of the neighborhood. Solving this dichotomy is Zeke’s ultimate duty and, as we will see in the last episode, he has to do that for the city and its community. An ally in this fight is, or at least appears to be, Francisco

“Papa Fuerte” Cruz. Although this borderline political figure is fictional, he is obviously inspired by real figures. As stated by Luhrmann during an interview, his character “is definitely based on different people who were identified as ‘poverty pimps in the Bronx,’ at the time” (IndieWire). His ambiguous figure (that can be assimilated to the one of Ramon S. Velez¹⁵) reflects a situation in the South Bronx of the 70’s in which a state of neglect from the institutions went along with a widespread corruption in institutions and in law enforcement. Cruz seems to embody this ideal “poverty pimp” with a foot into legality and the other into illegality (“the mayor has a very simple choice. Lose the election or fund my vision”). The problem of corruption has been represented in *Serpico* of 1973, directed by Sidney Lumet. It is the story of a patrolman, Frank Serpico, who, while working in a N.Y.P.D. precinct in the Bronx, discovered an underworld of corruption among his own colleagues. Corruption in institutions, was pervasive in the South Bronx according to journalist Margot Hornblower (NYTimes.com) and was extended to schools and housing programs (Gonzalez, 127 and 134).

Francisco Cruz, who has an office in a building called *Francisco Cruz Community Center*, wants to build what he nicknames “the Charlotte Street Taj Mahal” with the help of candidate Beame. The contradiction between the regality and majesty of the Taj Mahal and the distressing ruins of Charlotte Street strikes the viewer’s imagination. This contrast between splendor and bleakness that continues to survive in the South Bronx, is something that is perfectly caught by Don DeLillo in his story *The Angel Esmeralda*, which is set in the South Bronx. Here, the clash of sacred and evil (where evil means absence of God under the form of hope and light) emerges crystal clear. The South Bronx depicted by DeLillo is a metaphorical transposition of the history of the people of the South Bronx. The neighborhood

¹⁵ According to the New York Times, Ramon S. Velez was “the son of a poor Puerto Rican farmer and became the baron of a sweeping array of poverty programs in the South Bronx, receiving high praise for registering hundreds of thousands of Hispanic voters and stinging criticism for profiting from his humanitarian initiatives”.

creates the community and the community creates the neighborhood. Esmeralda's miracle cannot exist but for this mutual strengthening. This is also what happens with the birth of hip-hop culture; the passage from "nihilistic implosion" to "creative explosion" and the evolution of the neighborhood from hellhole to epicenter of a new hope, shows itself in the story of Esmeralda too. First, the South Bronx environment is described using these words:

The two women looked across a landscape of vacant lots filled with years of stratified deposits – the age-of-house garbage, the age of construction debris and vandalized car bodies. Many ages layered in waste. This area was called the Bird in jocular police parlance, short for bird sanctuary, a term that referred in this case to a tuck of land sitting adrift from the social order. [...] There were networks of vermin, craters choked with plumbing fixtures and sheetrock. There were hillocks of slashed tires laced with thriving vine. Gunfire sang at sunset off the low walls of demolished buildings.

Then, after the sacrifice of Esmeralda, even an ordinary billboard becomes,

the equivalent of a medieval church architecture. And the six-ounce cans of Minute Maid arrayed across the bottom of the board, a hundred identical cans so familiar in design and color and typeface that they had personality, the convivial cuteness of little orange people.

The creative power here emerges from ruins and despair thanks to the salvific figure of the young Esmeralda, whose murder, in its tragedy, unifies the neighborhood in hope.

Everything felt near at hand, breaking upon her, sadness and loss and glory and an old mother's bleak pity and a force at some deep level of lament that made her feel inseparable from the shakers and mourners, the awestruck who stood in tidal traffic – she was nameless for a moment [...], a disembodied fact in liquid form, pouring into the crowd.

Her miracle brings together not only the community of the South Bronx "block to block, moving through churches and superettes", but also the whole city that gathers around the billboard in a thousand people and elevates the South Bronx as bringer of light, a light stronger than the ones in Manhattan.

Faith, that throughout DeLillo's story is personified by the Sisters and seems limited only to them, becomes universal and popular beliefs melt with original faith in God. In the

final, epiphanic moment, when the train lights illuminate the billboard revealing Esmeralda's visage, the nuns are shocked and so are the poor people of the neighborhood, as they find themselves all at the same level, speechless in front of what seems to be an ecstatic vision. Sister Edgar, one of the nuns who see the miracle, embodies this new situation; at the beginning of the story, she is described as wearing "latex gloves onto her hands, [...], a shield against organic menace". In front of the miracle, instead, she lets the crowd embrace her and in doing so she humanizes both herself and the people with whom she is sharing that vision. Her final reflection seems a sort of confirmation of the universal powerlessness that makes individuals smaller and at the same time creates sacred places (whether it is a stable in Bethlehem or a billboard in the South Bronx):

Does the power of transcendence linger, the sense of an event that violates natural forces, something holy that robs on the hot horizon, the vision you crave because you need a sign to stand against your doubt?

The South Bronx itself conserves the answer to this question. Not only is it the place where this can happen, but it is also, or at least it seems, the only place where such a miracle could happen as we can observe in the tv series too. In fact, it is also depicted by DeLillo as something real ("This is the only real. The Bronx is real") but at the same time beyond reality, where a mythical figure like Esmeralda, even though appearing to be a sort of visual oxymoron, perfectly fits. "The Bird" ("a term that referred in this case to a tuck of land sitting adrift from the social order") seems to be an extemporaneous place, like the one portrayed by Luhrmann in *The Get Down* or by Castellari in *1990: The Bronx Warriors*. Ismael Muñoz, the gang leader that helps the nuns in delivering food to the poor people in the South Bronx, in a cross talk with Sister Gracie, says:

Sister Gracie: You have contacts in the neighborhood that no one else has.

Ismael: What neighborhood? The neighborhood's over there. This here's the Bird.

Ismael represents a link with that sad reputation of the South Bronx as gang-infested, but also a proof of the positive things that gang members used to do for their community (as I have already explained in Chapter 2). This story, however, offers further connections with the neighborhood and the community presented in *The Get Down* and in the other movies analyzed in Chapter 3.

First of all, let us consider the role of the train. As we have seen, the train is a fundamental figure in every movie set in the Bronx. It is the object that keeps the South Bronx linked to the rest of the city and in a more metaphorical sense, it helps perceiving the neighborhood as something real. It is also relevant because it was the main canvas for graffiti writers and their wild style, and, as a consequence, it retained a deep symbolical meaning as harbinger to the rest of the city of a new approaching culture. The train we see portrayed in *The Angel Esmeralda* has a very similar meaning to the one we see in every episode of *The Get Down*; it is that mystical and transcendental value for the people who looked at it as if they were in front of an apparition. This is, for example, what we see in the last scene of Episode 6 of the tv series, when the group of friends on a roof is waiting for the train to come.

Dizzee: That's us, Boo.

Ezekiel: Shit!

Dizzee: That's our train!

Everybody: All-city, yo!

In DeLillo's story the train with its headlights serves to make the miracle of Esmeralda's apparition possible. So, this terrible clattering iron worm has the power to give life to a hope, or an illusion of hope. This is also what happens in Luhrmann's work, where the train has the power to confer life to the words written upon it, giving a meaning to all of the episodes. Both trains contain the hopes of a community that is seeking to build ways of expression shared by the whole neighborhood. In one case we are talking about graffiti which, as we will see in *The Get Down*'s last episode when Zeke from the podium names all the pseudonyms of the South

Bronx graffiti writers, have the power to unite people in a shared (although personal and unique to every individual) narrative. In the other case, the train has the power to unite the community in a religious way, because it displays an extraordinary event that immediately becomes a shared memory in the timeline of the neighborhood's history. In *The Angel Esmeralda*, graffiti have the sacred value of honoring the dead by preserving their dignity in a sort of deconsecrated urban graveyard that contributes to give a mystical importance to the whole neighborhood:

This wall was where Ismael Muñoz and his crew of graffiti writers spray-painted a memorial angel every time a child died in the neighborhood. Angels in blue and pink covered roughly half the high slab. The child's name and age were printed in cartoon bubbles under each angel.

This characteristic of graffiti having the purpose of preserving the memory of the people of the neighborhood is symptomatic of the representation of the South Bronx as a community, maybe divided because of different ethnic origins and gang affiliation, but at the same time very attached to its uniqueness and jealous of its traditions. This image also emerges in the story *A New Display* included in *El Bronx Remembered* by Nicholasa Mohr. Here, reading new displays of deceased people becomes a way to enjoy time together for young kids of the South Bronx. They see the storefront window and in reading out loud the inscription they give value to their lives and continue to keep the memory of the neighborhood alive:

The children stood quietly and looked into the storefront window. [...] "Do you think we should read?" [...] Hannibal read slowly.

"To the Santiago family in their Hour of Bereavement..." He read on, looking at Joey when he finished.

"Beloved Son, Ramon Luis..." Joey read.

Each took a turn. (33-34)

This idea of keeping memory alive is also a recurrent element in DeLillo's story as well as in a movie like *Beat Street* and in *The Get Down*. In *Beat Street*, as we have seen,

graffiti are Ramo's legacy and a way to honor and remember him. In *The Get Down*, graffiti are a means to convey inspirational messages and graffiti artists are considered the true voices of the 'hood', as we see during Zeke's speech at Ed Koch's political meeting at the end of Episode 6. In addition, it is worth noting Shaolin Fantastic's similarity to the figure of Esmeralda. Both are introduced as mythical figures that transcend their current living place. Both have a salvational role in their respective stories; Esmeralda has a meaning for the people of the South Bronx, while Shaolin Fantastic is Zeke's savior, as Zeke himself states in his lyrics at the beginning of the first episode.

Picking up the thread, Episode 1 continues with a scene set in Charlotte Street.



An aerial shot introduces the viewers to a devastated landscape, with gutted and burned buildings and piles of rubble. The viewer seems to be transported into a moonscape with nothing but debris around. This sequence, actually melting archive images with the film, recalls the atmosphere of the already analyzed post-apocalyptic movies set in the South Bronx, like the ones by Enzo Castellari and, at the same time, brings our attention back to what was going on in New York City and in the South Bronx in particular. In fact, during that decade, the Charlotte Street area lost over 12,000 units of housing, with 7,000 in one year alone

(Rodriguez, 109). This environment acquires a magical atmosphere when the crew senses of being watched by a volatile figure, Shao (“He fearless, man”). The point of view of the camera here alternates from the boys to Shao: they are studying each other. This camera device allows the viewer to see the desperate conditions of Charlotte Street and what strikes us, apart from that, is that there is no one around. The idea of being in front of a “no man’s land” is perfectly conveyed. Another group of young men then enter the scene, it is the Savage Warlords gang. This gang is likely to have been inspired to the real Savage Skulls and they present themselves as consisting of all young boys dressed in jean jackets full of patches. Gang colors and denim or leather jackets were a fundamental distinctive sign¹⁶. In fact, Afrika Bambaataa remembers:

The colors is your shield. Most of the gangs of yesteryear wasn’t nervous to say who they were. So, if you was a Skull, a Spade, a Reaper, a Turban, you would wear with honor on your back of who you was. (Rubble Kings)

A fight between Zeke’s group and the gangs explodes; a gun appears, but everything stops when Francisco Cruz arrives on the scene shouting in a bullhorn, “[p]a fuera en la calle! [...] Everybody else, back to school!”. He knows the neighborhood and he also knows that it was very likely to find Spanish-speaking boys among them, so he uses both languages. Cruz is in Charlotte Street together with mayor’s advisor Stanley because he wants to show him the ignominious conditions of that part of the city. Stanley’s words present him as an advocate of the widespread idea among institutions that graffiti equalled crime. He says: “I can never make heads or tails of this graffiti shit”. Reflecting on that, Cruz offers a different perspective to the problem. Graffiti, he thinks, are a form of art that is on the walls (or trains) because kids do not have the opportunity to express themselves in schools. Back in time, the problem of education was in fact another issue afflicting the community. As Janet Grossbach Mayer

¹⁶ Gang symbols and clothes were used by New York gangs to claim with pride their affiliation. Conquering a jacket of a member of a rival gang was a way to gain respect and power within the gang’s structure. This has always been a peculiar characteristic of gangs. A contemporary example of that can be the difference that exists between two of the major gangs that share the streets in the U.S. nowadays: the Crips and the Bloods. Crip’s color is blue, while Blood’s color is red.

narrates in her book *As Bad as They Say?: Three Decades of Teaching in the Bronx* and as I said in Chapter 1, in 1975, after U.S. President Ford¹⁷ refused to concede a bailout to New York City, which was on the verge of financial ruin, repairs to New York public schools ended precipitously (36). In addition, beginning in the late 60's, courts applied the rule of *Desegregation buses*, the practice of assigning and transporting students in schools located in different neighborhoods in order to balance decades of school segregation. This practice, however, in the South Bronx led many families to abandon the neighborhood in favor of the suburbs in order to avoid reassignment (Demographia.com).

In the same scene, Cruz makes another important statement: “[L]andlord’s paying these gangs to burn buildings to collect the insurance money”. This statement reflects the fact there was a real problem with fires in the South Bronx at the time, to an extent that photographer David González of the nuyoricans collective *Seis del Sur* remembers, “it got to the point where you could hear fire engines everyday, you could smell the smoke and the fire like flowers in springtime” (SeisDelSur.com). In fact, seven different census districts in The Bronx lost more than 97% of their buildings to fire and abandonment between 1970 and 1980 and 44 districts (out of 289 in the borough) lost more than 50% (New York Post). So, that line he says reflects the popular opinion, shared by many contemporary scholars, that these fires were provoked by slumlords who wanted to collect insurance money or tenants looking to take advantage of a housing law that gave priority to victims of fire for subsidies. While this can be partially true, reporter Joe Flood added another explanation on why the Bronx burned, related to the fact that

[w]ith the help of the RAND Corp., the city tried to measure fire response times, identify redundancies in service, and close or re-allocate fire stations accordingly. What resulted,

¹⁷ A reference to President Ford’s behavior appears at the beginning of Episode 1, when, while M.C. Books is rapping, we see superimposed Daily News’ s first page of October 30, 1975, with the headline “FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD”, an epithet actually never said by the President according to Sam Roberts of the New York Times.

though, was a perfect storm of bad data: The methodology was flawed, the analysis was rife with biases, and the results were interpreted in a way that stacked the deck against poorer neighborhoods. The slower response times allowed smaller fires to rage uncontrolled in the city's most vulnerable communities. (FiveThirtyEight)

Biased data and corrupt behavior led to the closing of at least 7 fire companies in the South Bronx alone, with the outcome that fires became “contagious” (Wallace and Wallace, 47).

Cruz seems to acknowledge this part of the problem when he declares, “I gotta hear it from the fire chief over at Engine 71 that you closed two more firehouses, huh? I’m down four fucking firehouses in the last nine months here.”

The scene then goes back to the campus of the *South Bronx High School*. The boys are attending class with Miss Green in a huge building probably belonging to the American architectural style of the late XIX century. Miss Green announces that Ezekiel won a poetry writing contest, but he refuses to read his poem in front of the class. Meanwhile in Charlotte Street, a long shot locates Francisco Cruz and Stanley among the ruins. The exchange of words they have is particularly telling of the dichotomy taking place in the South Bronx:

FC: Look out onto that vista there, Stanley. Tell me what you see.

S: I see national disgrace.

FC: I see something beautiful, Stan. I see houses, like that model in my office. [...] I see homes for my rainbow people. I see ball fields for the kids. A library, right over there. Full of kids nourishing their intellectual curiosity. Prepping for internships, college and good jobs. [...] I see a proud community. [...] I see a new South Bronx and an attainable future for my people.

On one side there is Stanley, a delegate of Mayor Beame representing those institutions that almost abandoned the South Bronx, while on the other side there is “Cisco” Cruz who claims to be the voice of the “voiceless”. Two elements emerge from this crosstalk; first, Stanley in seeing that area as a “national disgrace” embodies the idea of “planned shrinkage” developed by Roger Starr, Housing Commissioner of New York City, in 1976. According to this public

policy, which was influenced by racist stereotypes against minorities, areas like the South Bronx had become a waste of money and could not be recovered (an idea that went along with the concept of “redlining” mentioned in Chapter 1). As a consequence, a proposed solution was to progressively cut services for the community, like for example the already mentioned fire stations (Wallace, 3). Second, the fact that Stanley and Cruz are trying to exchange votes with future investments reflects a common situation during those years, as I have already pointed out. In particular, Cruz/Velez, also known as “the Cacique,” “el Gordo” or “el Jefe,” (compared to Cruz’s nickname Papa Fuerte), according to David Gonzalez and Martin Gottlieb of *The New York Times*, was able to switch political alliances according to his and his people’s interests and in doing so he was always able to get funds for his anti-poverty programs. This is basically what happens in the tv series too, where Cruz first supports Beame and then switches to Koch looking for the candidate that could guarantee him more money. His dark side, however, is only sketched in *The Get Down*, maybe because his counterpart in real life it is still controversial today. In fact, the already mentioned Francisco Ferrer once declared: “Maybe he [Ramon Velez] doesn't break the law, maybe he bends it, maybe it's flexible in his hands” (NYTimes.com). The train is used again as a transitional device to introduce another setting and to bring the camera back on Zeke and his teacher. Worth noting here is the contrast between the cityscape crossed by the train (in which we see a building that is falling down) and the classroom. The idea of “nihilistic implosion” on one side and “creative explosion” on the other side is conveyed by the succession of the settings. This idea is also reinforced by Zeke’s reading of his touching poem; it is an emotional scene that emanates a deep strength and it is the symptom that something is about to change in the South Bronx. First, using maternal words¹⁸, Miss Green says:

¹⁸ Miss Green’s words recalls Michelle Obama’s final speech as FLOTUS (First Lady Of The United States), in which she said: “*Young people, don't be afraid. Be focused. Be determined. Be hopeful. Be empowered.*”

With just a little courage you could really be something. [...] Leaders lead, cowards cower. [...] The Bronx is a war zone. Our community is dying. And it's gonna take leaders to save it. That means you.

Then Zeke starts reciting his poem about his family, which is basically a rap song without the beat and this, again, is truly a moment of creative explosion:

I wasn't even sad, even when I learned the bullet was meant for my dad
Vietnam made pops crazy he was already half-dead
So why couldn't that'd be him that got shot in the head?
All the news that fits the print
Mama's death went unreported not a whiff or word or hint
"They don't care about us niggers" is how my pops explained it
But I didn't know I was a nigga till my dad proclaimed it
Six months later my pops is dead too
Drug-related shots fired his skin turned cold blue
On the news that night the President's wife got a new hair-do
The news guy said "I like it how about you?"
No word about my pops in the Post or on CBS, why was that you ask?
Take a fucking guess
And yeah why is that? Is what politicians should be asking
But who got time for questions when you all skiing up on Aspen?
Bronx get gunshots to the head and all y'all serving us is Asprin [...]
And yeah, I got anger

The climax is underlined by Miss Green's tears and by the increasing speed of Zeke's words. He says the line "I got anger" almost in shortness of breath, as if it was a monologue coming directly from his repressed anger. This moment is extremely relevant within the tv series and in my analysis of the representation of the neighborhood; Zeke is mad at politicians that did not look for solutions to improve minorities' conditions and that give themselves the freedom

Empower yourselves with a good education. Then get out there and use that education to build a country worthy of your boundless promise" (CNN.com).

of leaving part of their fellow Americans behind. But Zeke is also mad at society, at the media and the public opinion that contribute to create the invisibility of the men of color. His words, “Mama's death went unreported not a whiff or word or hint ‘They don't care about us niggers’” recalls an episode narrated by Ralph Waldo Ellison in the prologue of his *Invisible Man*:

I accidentally bumped into a man, and perhaps because of the near darkness he saw me and called me an insulting name. [...] I felt his flesh tear and the blood gush out, and I yelled, "Apologize! Apologize!" But he continued to curse and struggle. [...] [w]hen it occurred to me that the man had not seen me, actually; [...] The next day I saw his picture in the Daily News, beneath a caption stating that he had been "mugged." Poor fool, poor blind fool, I thought with sincere compassion, mugged by an invisible man! (Ellison, 4-5)

Zeke understands that he is considered black when he realizes that he is invisible, that the death of his beloved ones did not make the news¹⁹. In his invisibility, he gains conscience of who he is and where he lives. The Bronx here emerges as a place where society has forced them to live in order not to worry too much about those people, following the idea of “benign neglect” first developed by American sociologist and politician Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Zeke’s words are useful to underline and to attack the fact that society seems to point in the direction of the creation of two different identities, white and black, that in their view must be clearly separated. In fact, politicians gave those people “Aspirin” because is in their interest to nurse the symptoms but not the causes and because there was this widespread idea that South Bronx residents were “ill” people. A parallel to the current movement Black Lives Matter can be drawn here; Zeke seems to be shouting “I got anger because you don’t consider us, but we matter, we have value and my mom would have made your head spin”. From his

¹⁹ The Kerner report issued after the 1967 riots in Detroit had acknowledged the problem of the relationship between African Americans and the media and had stated that actions must have been taken to “expand coverage of the Negro community and of race problems through permanent assignment of reporters familiar with urban and racial affairs, and through establishment of more and better links with the Negro community. [and to]

Integrate Negroes and Negro activities into all aspects of cov-erage and content, including newspaper articles and television programming. The news media must publish newspapers and produce programs that recognize the existence and activities of Negroes as a group within the community and as a part of the larger community.

poem we also understand something more about his personal life; his mom is dead, but she is still his point of reference. He gives a kiss to the photo of his mom before he goes to school at the beginning of Episode 1 and then he talks proudly about her from the podium at Koch's rally in Episode 6 ("I'm gonna do my best to show all of you that my mama was right"). Instead, what we know of his dad is just that he was a Vietnam veteran, he died for some drug-related shooting and that, above all, the bullet that killed Zeke's mom was meant for him. So, while his mother is always part of his life, his father is more absent in his memory. The absence of fathers in inner cities and in places like the South Bronx is another relevant topic in the definition of the neighborhood and the community that emerge from the tv series. According to Gonzalez, however, it is also a topic that must be seriously confronted in order to avoid stereotypes and easy prejudice. It is not by chance that the *Moynihan Report* (officially called *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*) written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan to address the problem of racial inequality in terms of family structure is considered still today to be one of the most controversial and debated documents in American history²⁰. What can be said is that understanding the father's role (or absence) in both the African-American and Puerto Rican family of the South Bronx is an issue that deserves a separate space for research and debate. In *The Get Down* we see two opposed depictions of being a father; on the one hand, we have the absence in Zeke's life of a father figure, and on the other we have the too-invasive presence of Mylene's father in her life. In addition, we have no information about Shaolin's situation, except that apparently, he was raised by South Bronx's kingpin "Fat Annie". Complicated parental conditions, in fact, reflect the complexity of the South Bronx's condition itself. To reinforce the importance, but also the complexity of this issue for the

²⁰ To read the full report see: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/the-moynihan-report-an-annotated-edition/404632/>.

African American communities, two rap songs can help. One is called *Papa'z Song* and it is by rapper Tupac Shakur:

Where was the money that you said you would send me?
Talked on the phone and you sounded so friendly
Ask about school and my welfare
But it's clear you ain't sincere and who the hell cares
You think I'm blind but this time I see you comin', Jack
You grabbed your coat, left us broke, now ain't no runnin' back
Ask about my moms like you loved her from the start
Left her in the dark, she fell apart from a broken heart.

The other is called *Poppa was a Playa* and it is by the already mentioned Nas:

So many kids I knew, never knew who Pap was
That's why I show my pop love
He was still around when I popped up
He could have left
My moms pregnant shook to death but stayed
Watch me crawl till I took my first step, to the first grade
To my first fist fight
Right behind me he would stand
No matter how big or tall he made me fight you like a man

The scene moves back to the green park in front of the high-school. Here Mylene and her friends are planning their night at *Les Inferno*, while Zeke and Ra-ra are figuring out how Zeke should behave with Mylene. The setting is quiet and relaxed and the environment seems to be on a different planet than that of Charlotte Street even if we see the tall buildings, the so called projects, surrounding the park. For this reason, the contrast with the following scene is visually striking; it starts with an aerial shot followed by an establishing shot and the location is again a devastated South Bronx.



As we can see, the colors change completely. The park surrounding the high school was of a bright green, in which the students' colorful clothes stand out. Instead, the cityscape now turns into a smoky grey that recalls the old images of a XIX century London and that is not too far from a JMW Turner's painting. The meaning is also different; the juxtaposition of such different settings conveys the idea that on the one hand we have the future, young people studying in a green environment and on the other we have a grey, desolated land where no one is around apart from a running figure. This visual dichotomy reflects the contradictions of the South Bronx at the time, a place divided between its troubled past and its vibrant future as the cradle of urban creativity. That running man, by the way, is Shao. As soon as he stops running, he is framed as a mythical figure, a statue, with the light that gives him an aura from behind.

It turns out that both he and Zeke need a vinyl that can be found at a record store owned by a Jamaican in Charlotte Street. Two things emerge here about the representation of the neighborhood; first, Luhrmann uses another archive video and we can be sure of this because, in one frame, a member of the original N.Y. gang "Savage Nomads" can be spotted. This use of real images of the past creates a continuous alternation of myth and reality, to the extent that the viewer is led to think that the Bronx is both, or it could be both. Second, the reference

to a Jamaican owner opens up the representation of the ethnic composition of the neighborhood. In fact, even hip-hop pioneer Clive Campbell, better known as D.J. Kool Herc, was originally from Jamaica. Jamaican migration to this neighborhood and to the U.S. in general was conditioned by the influence that the United States, in particular thanks to their soft power, were able to employ over Jamaica. Once Jamaica proclaimed independence from Great Britain in 1962, its people began to migrate to the United States instead of Great Britain. Kool Herc was part of this influx that had Brooklyn and the South Bronx as main destinations (Rubin and Melnick, 188). For this reason it is pertinent to highlight the presence of a Jamaican record store, which is called “Jamaican Top Stop” with a caption saying “Jamaican-American”, in the series, as it is a way to represent the different minorities that played a role in the neighborhood.

At the record store, there are the Savage Warlords that are threatening the owner because he has not paid his protection money (this was a common behavior for gangs), Zeke and Shao. Zeke finds the record he needs, but Shao steals it and starts running followed by the gang on one hand and Zeke on the other. A long running-scene starts. They all run through a very crowded place, but also through the ruins. Firemen are driving to extinguish the umpteenth fire while everyone is in a hurry. People among the ruins are always running, always in a hurry. That is a setting where action is always dynamic and editing is frantic. This way of representing the place conveys instability and impending danger and so it reinforces the idea of the South Bronx as a place where people did not want to stay, a place from which everyone wanted to run away. However, at the same time, as we have seen, there are several scenes set in quiet, crowded and colorful places as if to say that the South Bronx was both life and death, peace and war. It is a dichotomy represented through the alternation of visual inputs that help define the neighborhood 360-degrees.

In an incredible jump onto a roof, Shao loses the record and Zeke takes it. Here we hear M.C. Books voice-over saying: “Hey yo, Shao...that’s when our journey began. I’ll never forget the first day we met”. Transitional framings of firefighters and an aerial shot of the neighborhood that seems a blurred mass of damaged buildings guide the scene to Kipling’s house where all the friends are eating together in a big and multicultural table that reinforces the idea of community ties. They are talking about the idea of going to a movie theater to see *Satan’s Cheerleader* and *Star Wars* which came out between the end of May and the beginning of June 1977. Then Kipling’s dad enters the scene playing the saxophone in what could be seen as a homage to Nas’ father, Olu Dara, who was a famous trumpet player. The dialog he has with Dizze reveals something about what was going on in the neighborhood.

Dizze: I told you dad, I’m into pop art now. I quit writing graffiti. [...]

Dizze’s father: If you get locked up again I’m gonna leave you in there, Dizz.

This crosstalk underlines indirectly that, as we have seen, graffiti writing was treated as a real issue by authorities and in fact as stated a few years ago by Ed Koch himself, he even thought of using wild wolves in the subways as a solution against graffiti writers. An increase in arrests and other measures considerably reduced painting on New York City subways (Snyder, 147).

The film director juxtaposes again “implosion” and explosion thanks to the use of editing. In fact, we see Zeke and Mylene respectively choosing fancy clothes for the night out at *Les Inferno*, while adults are watching a reportage about gang violence. The voice of the broadcaster is saying something about the Savage Warlords and then about a beef between Nicky Barnes of Harlem and Fat Annie of the South Bronx over the heroin trade in New York. These sad facts contrast with the solemnity of Zeke’s dressing up with the help of Ra-ra: on the one hand, we have something that is destroying the neighborhood, gangs and heroin; on the other we have someone that is dignifying the people of the neighborhood by wearing the best clothes and the best shoes possible to go out. In fact, the importance of style was a feature

of that period as is pointed out in a recent 2015 documentary called *Fresh Dressed* directed by Sacha Jenkins and produced by hip-hop superstar Pharrell Williams. As stated by André Leon Talley in the documentary, “hip-hop culture’s not just about the music, it’s also about a lifestyle. It’s people who are free, who are exploring their creativity” and the Bronx style, according to Guy Wood, was a unique mix between the Brooklyn and Harlem style. We see Mylene’s father preaching, he says: “[...] even the righteous are born in sin and must bear the iniquities of their fathers”, a sentence that seems to metaphorically link the bad things we just heard with the brighter future that is coming. The “righteous born in sin” can be the hip-hoppers born in ruins that must carry the complex value of their past”.

The place where everybody wants to go, *Les Inferno*, is a fictional place, but it is clearly inspired by the famous dance club of the South Bronx called *Disco Fever*. By 1976, this venue owned by Sal Abbatiello, had become “the hottest hip-hop dance club in New York City as well as [a] main attraction for music business entrepreneurs, leading the South Bronx to surface as [a] major creative center of rap music” (Keyes, 61). In the series, *Les Inferno* is Fat Annie’s headquarters, that is, the perfect place to find gangsters and drugs. Here again, reality and fiction merge, because although she is an invented character, her rival Nicky Barnes was a real gangster from Harlem. His figure and the reference to heroin reminds the viewer that drugs like cocaine and heroin were a real issue in New York City’s boroughs and in the Bronx in particular. In fact, the impact of heroin on the Bronx is something that is often narrated by Bronx residents interviewed through the already mentioned Bronx African American History Project at Fordham University.

At the same time, thanks to an establishing shot we know that Dizzee and Boo-boo are at the train station writing graffiti and in a long shot we see that the letters they are writing compose a symbolic word, “Hope”.

The scene then moves again to the *Les Inferno* where Fat Annie is running her cocaine business and celebrating her birthday. The place is full of people taking drugs and dancing in a classic Luhrmann setting, that is excessive and colorful. *Les Inferno* appears as a place where people are not really enjoying themselves, but who are there just because it is “cool” or, like Mylene, they are in search of an opportunity. That place soon becomes the theater of an ambush by the Savage Warlords who try to kill Annie

Outside *Les Inferno* Shao and Zeke for the first time have the opportunity to confront each other over that famous record (that can be considered as a MacGuffin in the overall development of the tv series). During the fight between the two we have another symbolic proof of the creative explosion arising from difficult situations; this happens when Zeke, with a knife pointed to his throat, says: “ ‘Cause I ain’t no hard rock like you, but when it comes to my girl, I’m all heart [...] You might kill me but you’ll never beat me”. This is the moment that confirms the idea, common in Luhrmann’s works, of the value of having a simple plot: Zeke’s love story with Mylene is a classic love story, but it has the deeper purpose of enhancing the representation of the South Bronx itself. This happens because every time Zeke talks about Mylene there is an explosion of creativity, no matter where he is. The symbolic value behind all this is that love and creativity can find their flowering even if the surrounding environment is everything but full of love. This also explains why a community which was neglected by everyone during those years, was still able to create a movement and make a difference.

Another image that refers to the South Bronx of 1977, mingling fiction with reality, is the frame of Fat Annie’s birthday cake: over a portrait of her smoking a cigar in a bossy pose, the caption is: “South Bronx Times, Mrs. Untouchable”, a clear reference to New York Times’ cover of June 5, 1977 with Nicky Barnes on it accompanied by the caption “Mr. Untouchable”. In addition, the fact that she has been nominated as Mrs. Untouchable not of New York or

The Bronx, but of the South Bronx in particular, seems to underline how that neighborhood at the time was perceived by institutions and also by the community itself as something else, something beyond easy categorization.

After the ambush by the Savage Warlords, the chaotic scene at the disco club and the setting moves to a Puerto Rican club that, thanks to an establishing shot, we know it is called “Hijos Boricuas Del Bronx Social Club”. This change in setting is signalled by latin music playing. Social clubs, in fact, were fundamental places for immigrant groups arriving in New York City because they provided a wide range of service and support (Herencialatina.com). They served as places to in which creating identities and maintaining traditions was possible. This role can be seen in the tv series, for example, by looking at the Puerto Rican flag above the entrance and by noticing the use of a mix between English and Spanish:

Francisco Cruz: Tráeme algo especial ahí. Un bridis! To Stan, for supporting my housing vision. And also, a toast! To Jackie. [...] Salud!

Then the scene goes back to the streets around the disco club. Here, Zeke and Mylene are arguing. It is worth quoting this dialog because it expresses this tension between implosion and explosion and between the past and future of the neighborhood itself:

Mylene: I’m gonna be a singer, I’m gonna be a disco star.

Ezekiel: I know you will. I know.

M: And someday soon I’m gonna cross the East River, and I can’t let anybody distract me from that. [...] You’re so smart and you just mess around with it. I’m gonna be with a man who has goals and has a plan. Not a kid from the neighborhood.

Again, the Dream is geographically defined; for a person living in the South Bronx at that time “having success” meant crossing the East River, that is, marking a clear separation between that decaying neighborhood and a brighter future. That also means getting closer to the Dream, the Liberty. Then, when Mylene says the phrase, “not a kid from the neighborhood” in giving a negative connotation to the South Bronx, she also gives importance

to the place, as if it was a city in itself. Her words are a way to acknowledge the struggle of that community, for which success is always earned and not given. This is an idea that is common in the American imagination. An example from real life could be LeBron James's words from the podium after having won the N.B.A. title in 2013: "I'm LeBron James from Akron, Ohio, from the inner city, I'm not even supposed to be here. [...] I'm blessed!". This dichotomy between the neighborhood and the city and between staying or emigrating is something that also emerges at the end of Part 1 in the already mentioned dialog between Zeke and Mylene. As we have seen, however, reality in 1977 was one where white people were running away from the South Bronx, while African-Americans and Puerto Ricans were taking their place.

Zeke and his friends are dawdling at the park at night; Luhrmann's idea behind that is to debunk the stereotype that the South Bronx was just a dangerous place. On the contrary, it is an area where kids could do something more than just protecting themselves against spiteful people. It might be sound predictable, but according to what we have seen in Chapter 2, it is not. Shao's arrival, introduced with a bottom-up shot and mystical music, leads the crew to follow him to the "flyest, secret underground party in the entire Bronx". Before introducing that scene it is worth noting is what Shaolin says to his "colleague" Dizzee a.k.a. Rumi 411, "you stay up with Crash and Daze. You also down with the Soul Artists?" This line is a homage to real graffiti writers of that period. In fact, John "Crash" Matos from the Bronx and Chris "Daze"²¹ Ellis from Brooklyn collaborated with Luhrmann in realizing the accurate settings of the tv series and also wrote each episode's title in graffiti styles that were popular in the late 70's and early 80's. Some of those murals, in particular "Seek those who fan your flame" (Episode 2) and "Forget safety. Be notorious" (Episode 4) can be found for real respectively in North 10th Street and Wythe Avenue and West 25th St. and Sixth Avenue

²¹ The graffiti writer Daze also appears in *Wild Style*.

(NYPost.com). Also the Soul Artists were a real graffiti crew from New York City who had a pivotal role in developing a link between street art and “established art” creating “a place where the best of the graffiti community could connect with one another as well as figures in the larger art world” (Rushmore, 10).

The party presented is in stark contrast with the party that was going on at *Les Inferno*. Here the venue seems to be a crumbling house, but unlike what we saw before, the crowd is actually enjoying being there. It is a situation that can be portrayed borrowing the words of hip-hop pioneer Grandmaster Caz: “Disco was just really too polished. You gotta understand hip-hop is the streets. [...] We were gonna either start hip-hop or start a revolution” (From *Mambo to Hip-hop: a South Bronx Tale*). At the party, the dark colors of the setting, above all compared to the bright and colorful disco club, cannot stop people from dancing and having fun. This visual metaphor reinforces the idea that something was coming out from that hellhole that was the South Bronx during those years. Again, both souls of the neighborhood are unfolded in creating a clear visual contrast. The D.J. is Grandmaster Flash himself and thanks to an explanation by Shao we understand what the “get down” is and, above all, we see the “creative explosion” definitively unleashed. This happens when Zeke borrows the microphone from Cowboy²², one of the real MCs of Flash. After having failed a first time, he becomes an M.C. for one night and makes the most of his “gift”. Worth noting here are the lines that the crowd say to him the first time, when he is not able to say anything at the mic: “Yo, disco faggot, you don’t belong here. You fucking suck! Get that motherfucker disco duck the fuck outta here” Here the value of bonds and friendship in the community comes in and while we hear a mystic voice saying “you dare to turn against my brother?” Shao joins the crowd and starts breakdancing. In acting like that he is able to give Zeke another opportunity to show his talent (“He showed me my superpower” as the voice-over of M.C. Books recalls). The camera

²² Cowboy was a member of the Furious Five together with Melle Mel, Kid Creole, Rahiem and Scorpio.

moves fast bottom-up and top-down trying to convey a sense of energy and dynamism but also a sense of community. In other words, the crowd is perceived as a single united entity.

The scene at the underground party finally displays all the fundamental elements of hip-hop as listed by professor Todd Boyd: apart from graffiti, which are everywhere throughout the episode, now MCin' (with Zeke), DJin' (with Grandmaster Flash) and breakdancin' (with Shaolin) are put into the game (48). This is the moment of maximum creative explosion, where it seems that the plot and the actual history of the South Bronx are taking a big step ahead. Zeke's performance with his crowd incitement line "...and you don't stop" references a classic expression that was being used during hip-hop parties and also echoes one of the most famous hip-hop songs of all time, the already mentioned *Rapper's Delight*, which says:

Just throw your hands up in the air
And party hardy like you just don't care
Let's do it, don't stop, y'all, a tick tock, y'all, you don't stop!

Luhrmann's idea of letting Zeke fail once before emanating his potential also adds epicism to the narration. This epicism goes on even after the end of the party, when they all reach Shao's crib together. This is "the temple" as Shao himself defines it and it is significant that the crew only visit this magical place at the end of the episode. It is like a long path coming to an end and it reflects the complex history of the South Bronx itself. The journey is personified in the character of Shao. He goes from gang banging to djin', always running, he moves from the decadent Charlotte Street to the green park and "the temple". He goes from being a lone samurai to being part of a team, a community. He embraces gang lifestyle but he also transforms his experience into something different, something creative from graffiti writing to breakdancing and djing. He is that necessary trait-d'union that allows *The Get Down* to finally offer a more complete perspective over the representation of the South Bronx of the

late 70's and early 80's. and reflects the idea shared by hip-hop pioneer D.J. Red Alert who, in an interview, stated:

I always thought there was a connection between gang culture and hip-hop because from what I learned that either you was a D.J., a M.C., a break-dancer, or a graffiti artist, once upon a time, one of them members was part of a gang. (Rubble Kings)

At his crib the boys finally experience freedom. It all comes down again to this continual repetition of the already mentioned dichotomy that is solved by Luhrmann thanks to his classic signature style, that is, mixing reality and epic. The most evident proof of that comes at the end when Shao describes the Bronx as divided into three different kingdoms ruled by three different real DJs²³:

I'm about to introduce you guys to the three kingdoms: we got the west. There's the land of D.J. Kool Herc. [...] Over here are his rivals, Bambaataa and the Zulus. [...] Right now, right here and will always forever be the land, the kingdom of Grandmaster Flash.

Shao then also adds that the future kingdom of the newborn Fantastic Four Plus One will be "from Hunts Point to Riverdale" that is, the South Bronx area from East to West. So, the South Bronx in the end is presented as something that is beyond reality and because of that it can offer endless possibilities of rising up.

The train carrying Dize's words "Where There Is Ruin, There Is Hope for a Treasure" that appears in the dawn now acquires more sense, because the treasure has finally been discovered.

²³ Grandmaster Flash, Afrika Bambaataa and D.J. Kool Herc are actually known in hip-hop circles by an evoking name: The Holy Trinity (Hip-Hop Evolution).



The episode ends with another aerial shot of the Statue of Liberty, which, after all we have seen, seems not so far away, even from the South Bronx.

4.4 CONCLUSION

The in-depth analysis of the pilot episode of *The Get Down* shows how, using the device of a simple love story between two young adults, the film director and his team have sent a love letter to that area of New York City. In fact, the South Bronx here emerges both in its “negative implosion” with its devastation, crime and poverty and in its “creative explosion” with its graffiti, dance and music. The collage of fictional characters and real figures helps to recreate an atmosphere that had been altered by the partial portraits realized in the past. Obviously, this has been possible also thanks to the long period that has passed between that era and today and that has facilitated a stabilization and evaluation which is less conditioned by preconceptions. It is also true, however, that the passing of time cannot be the only explanation, because, as we have seen, the legacy of those years continues very often to cloud the image of a neighborhood that nowadays has evolved. A final evaluation on the filmic

narrative about the South Bronx of the second half of the XX century and on the consequences of this representation will be the object of my last section.

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FINAL THOUGHTS

This dissertation aimed, first of all, to discuss the cinematic representation of the South Bronx in the second half of the 20th century, from *The Warriors* to the more recent tv series *The Get Down*. My focus, in particular, was on all the movies that used that neighborhood and its “nihilistic implosion” or “creative explosion” as a relevant element in their narration. As I said throughout my work, this neighborhood had an indisputable fascination from a social and artistic point of view. In addition, its images have been always very powerful and visually captivating, offering a perfect “catchment area” for the movie industry.

The first idea that has emerged from my analysis is that an era and a place so complex and full of shades needed a period of detachment in order to be fully understood and then transposed on screen. As I tried to point out in the previous pages, each of the movies that came out during the 70’s and the 80’s and that attempted to offer a depiction of that neighborhood (or of the whole borough) has often only offered a partial image. Sometimes movies were deeply oriented to the negative side of the South Bronx while sometimes they were focused only on its positive aspects. This dichotomy has incited me to carry out further analysis of a topic that, especially for someone with an international point of view like me, is fascinating in its complexity. Within this narrative I tried to include *The Get Down*, that is, the series that shifted the attention back to the history of the South Bronx (and hip-hop culture) after many years. What I realized was that Luhrmann’s work, both considered entirely or just taking into account the pilot episode, showed a different perspective that, while mixing fiction and reality, was able to re-elaborate all of the past experiences in dealing with this topic. *The Get Down* offered an all-embracing perspective that was able to convey the atmosphere of the South Bronx at that time, connecting its “nihilistic implosion” to its “creative explosion”. This outcome is even more important if we acknowledge the power that the cinematic representation of this area of New York City has had in creating a negative projection of the

Bronx at a national and international level. This borough suffered for many factors, but its transposition on screen, while reproducing reality, heightened it, too often in a negative way. As a consequence, I hope my analysis can shed some light on the broader topic of the relationship between reality and its representation on screen. This is, in fact, an urgent debate if we look at what happened and what is currently happening with the new Trump administration and the issue of “Alternative News”. Misconceptions and false beliefs can lead uninformed people to support wrong causes and to build walls instead of creating connections. The movie industry and the television industry nowadays have all the tools to promote quality products with social contents without giving up on the entertainment side.

Throughout this work, I tried to use always peer-reviewed sources, whenever possible, but I have also acknowledged the value of quoting interviews with people that lived that place during those years. I decided to do so because, even if I am aware that some oral declarations cannot be considered as irrefutable evidence, I also firmly believe that to understand the evolution of a community and a movement you need to be connected as closely as possible to the real voices of the ordinary people of the neighborhood. Unfortunately, due to the huge distance between where I live and the place I am talking about, I was not able to conduct an ethnographic research on the field. However, I think that there are still many elements that need to be analyzed and I hope, one day, to expand my study on this neighborhood and its representation on screen with a research on the field that can connect the current situation of the Bronx to the persistent bad reputation that is still widespread everywhere. In particular, I believe that an analysis of the literary production of the minorities who lived in “El Bronx” and who witnessed those historical moments, needs to be done. With regard to that, it is worth noting that, as stated by Loretta M. D’Orsogna (196-197), there is an evident contrast between the South Bronx as represented in movies and the image that emerges from narratives, which

are mostly memoirs or stories telling how hard it was to grow up in a neighborhood forgotten by everyone.

In the end, I would like to highlight the fact that, after Barnes & Noble closed on 31 December 2016, the Bronx, a borough with more than 1,400,000 million of people, was left without any bookstores. Luckily, a millennial, Afro-latina, called Noëlle Santos, started a crowfund to open a place in the borough where the community can read, work, meet, and socialize, because, as she says: “the Bronx is no longer burning... except with desire to read”²⁴.

²⁴ To have more information about the project see: <http://www.thelitbar.com/bookstoregoals/> and http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/this-afro-latina-is-raising-funds-to-open-the-bronxs-only-bookstore_us_589b924ae4b04061313b6bb3?

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ABSTRACT

“The Bronx” nowadays is a word synonym for urban decay in the public imagination. All around the world we can find urban areas nicknamed “The Bronx”, usually those places where locals suggest you should not go to. This notorious reputation can be traced back to the late 70’s and early 80’s of the XX century, when what was going on in the Bronx, in particular in its southernmost part, became renowned throughout the world. The reality beneath the veil was one of a territory infested by gangs and crime, against a backdrop spoiled by fires. Its name, then, crossed the U.S. national borders thanks mostly to its depiction on the big screen. However, the same area, basically during those years, was also the cradle for the development of hip-hop culture, a movement that changed the music industry and popular culture for years. From a “nihilistic implosion” to a “creative explosion”. This dissertation analyzes this dichotomic portrayal of the Bronx, the South Bronx in particular, as it appears in the movies that came out during the late 70’s and early 80’s, comparing them to the more recent Netflix series, *The Get Down*. For this reason, the first two chapters rely on secondary sources and present the evolution of the neighborhood from a historical perspective (First Chapter) and the organization of youth gangs in post-war New York (Second Chapter). Then, the last two chapters are based on an analysis of the representation of the South Bronx in the movies of the period, from *The Warriors* and *1990: The Bronx Warriors* on one hand, to *Wild Style* and *Beat Street* on the other (Third Chapter). The last chapter analyzes how lights and shadows of the South Bronx are represented in *The Get Down*. In the conclusion, final thoughts are given not only on how the complexity of this neighborhood emerges on screen, but also on the importance of this filmic representation in shaping the public perception of the area.