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Hollywood buddy cop action films reached great popularity among American audiences of the 1980s. The genre offered something more than entertainment: it offered a vision of a country where race was no longer a meaningful concept – a vision of a post-racial society. In the wake of the biggest protests against racial injustice in decades, which in 2020 swept the United States and spread to parts of Europe, it is worth revisiting the genre which significantly contributed to the development of popular imagination about race. This article provides a closer look at a staple of the buddy cop genre, the 1987's Lethal Weapon. While ostensibly a progressive production, a deeper analysis shows the film to not only call upon traditionally racist portrayals of black people, but to justify a color blind approach to policing. Thus, the article shows how Hollywood worked to disavow the racialized reality of the 1980s. This disavowal is very much a current in society today.

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Colorblindness and Masculinity: "Lethal Weapon" and the Construction of a Postracial Reality

A black man and a white man, coming from radically disparate backgrounds, learn to overcome their differences and work together to stop crime. This, generally speaking, is the fantasy of biracial buddy action films which captured Hollywood's imagination in the 1980s. Perhaps the best known among them is *Lethal Weapon* (1987), a movie that enjoys a continued cult following (with a reboot television series airing between 2016 and 2019, and a fourth sequel on the way). What makes this film worth revisiting today is the ideological continuity between racial discourses of the 1980s and today's debates about race and incarceration, including the Black Lives Matter movement and the conservative responses to its claims.

2020 saw the largest protests against police brutality and racism in the United States in decades. Following the death of George Floyd, hundreds of thousands took to the streets in protest against an apparently systemic problem within the country's law enforcement. The response they received from some of the country's top officials struck many as tone-deaf when, for example, both the United States Attorney General and the acting Department of Homeland Security secretary stated that they did not believe the law enforcement system of the United States was systemically racist.[1] Meanwhile, in a repeat of 2014's protests against police brutality in New York, Black Lives Matter activists encountered the reactionary Blue (police) Lives Matter countermovement, whose followers refuse to see the repeated acts of police brutality against black people as part of a wider racial problem. Instead the protests are framed as unfounded attacks on the country's police officers, who are simply doing their jobs, while any acts of discrimination are

pinned on isolated actors, so called "bad apples".

The public debate spanned most of 2020, culminating in a presidential election during which Donald Trump referred to protesters as "thugs", pushed to deploy federal forces to quell the demonstrations,[2] and stated that no other president, save perhaps Abraham Lincoln, had done as much as he had for America's black communities.[3] Although he did not win a second term, Trump still got over 47% of the popular vote. Of course, neither the president, nor any other office-holder, nor the people opposing Black Lives Matter ever publicly admitted to holding racist views. It appears that the main issue in the contemporary debate about race in America is whether race is in fact an issue. Somewhat paradoxically, it is the conservative side of that debate that argues that race no longer means anything more than skin color, in defiance of extensive evidence to the contrary.

To understand how the conservative discourse of colorblindness is rooted in the 1980s it is best to turn to Michelle Alexander's hugely influential 2012 study *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*.[4] As the book argues, the highly publicized "drug problem" of the 1980s, which started the United States' war on drugs, was in fact an ideological construct aimed at justifying the establishment of a system of effective racial control. According to Alexander, this system – through a combination of extreme penalization of relatively minor crimes and the justice and police systems' racial biases – effectively functions to control the United States' black population in a similar way to Jim Crow laws, which were struck down following the victories of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. This paper proposes to revisit *Lethal Weapon*, a key work of 1980s popular culture, in the light of Alexander's argument. The movie's racial ideology, it will be argued here, is very much in line with the broader cultural project of "mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness." Anyone who was troubled by the

racial bias of the war on drugs had only to see *Lethal Weapon* to be reminded of the righteousness of the police, and the need for brutal force to be employed against crime. Such escapism is what hearing people cry "blue lives matter" may bring to mind today, yet the process at play is more insidious than simple escapism.

Films such as *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984), *Lethal Weapon*, and *Die Hard* (1988) (all of which enjoyed major box-office success upon release and have spawned multiple sequels) can be read retrospectively as offering a distinctive form of articulating racialized reality in the United States, a form which remains enormously attractive to a large portion of the American (as well as, arguably, the global) public. I call this articulation the *disavowal of race*. Interestingly, as Christopher Ames points out in his analysis of the genre,[5] buddy action films constitute an evolution, or a new realization, of a motif that was present in American literature as far back as the nineteenth century. The formula was famously described by Leslie Fiedler in *Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!*[6] Two men, one white, the other of color (though not necessarily black), form a pure masculine bond away from civilization. The story of biracial escape from society unfolds in classic American novels such as the *Leatherstocking Tales*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In forming a platonic, but intensely homoerotic couple, they play out a fantasy of boyhood love so innocent that it defies the realities of race in American society. As Fiedler writes, "in each generation we *play out* the impossible mythos, and we live to see our children play it: the white boy and the black we can discover wrestling affectionately on any American sidewalk, along which they will walk in adulthood, eyes averted from each other, unwilling to touch even by accident."[7] Ames saw those same stories, adapted for modern audiences, in the 1980s action cinema. Thus, the buddy action film genre warrants analysis not only because of its enduring popularity, indicative of the

pervasiveness of its themes, but also because its core motif appears to be deeply ingrained in the American collective imagination. The only way of transgressing race is to enact a homosocial masculine bond, a pure and spectacular manly friendship.

Richard Donner's *Lethal Weapon* employs that exact strategy. Starring Mel Gibson and Danny Glover as its protagonists, the film tells the story of two Los Angeles cops who have to team up to take down a dangerous drug cartel. In the process they form an effective police unit and develop a close friendship. Their characters are noteworthy because they subvert stereotypical portrayals: the black cop, Roger Murtaugh, is socially well adjusted, a family man with a loving wife and children; the white one, Martin Riggs, is an unstable outsider. The film effectively features a black civilized man and a white savage. Meanwhile, because its plot revolves around drug crime, it also refers to real problems facing America in the late 1980s more directly than one might expect from a popular action film. On the surface, then, *Lethal Weapon* might seem to be a surprisingly progressive film. Starring a black hero, it subverts racist stereotypes and glorifies black and white friendship, while at the same time referencing serious real-world problems of the war on drugs.

To highlight just how important the combination of the buddy action genre with the war on drugs is, it would seem best to turn once more to Alexander's *New Jim Crow*:

> In June 1986, *Newsweek* declared crack to be the biggest story since Vietnam/Watergate, and in August of that year, *Time* magazine termed crack "the issue of the year." Thousands of stories about the crack crisis flooded the airwaves and newsstands, and the stories had a clear racial subtext.[8]

Alexander adds that the "bonanza continued into 1989."[9] A film about a white and a black policeman fighting a drug cartel

in the streets of Los Angeles premiering at the height of the drug crisis is certainly noteworthy. More than that, since most of the black people appearing on screen are actually police officers (while, as will be discussed later on, virtually all of the criminals are white) it could be argued that *Lethal Weapon* was indeed intended to be a politically progressive production, defying the media of its time.

This paper argues the opposite: all pretense of a progressive message on race is dispelled when analyzing the film in detail. In fact, *Lethal Weapon*'s approach to race seems markedly conservative, as despite subverting racist stereotypes it remains virtually colorblind. The protagonists never seem to notice that their skin is a different color, moreover, the Los Angeles presented on screen seems to be constructed specifically to ensure they will never have any reason to make such an observation. Thus, the film not only refuses to acknowledge real social problems plaguing the US at the time, it also negates its own progressive handling of the race issue. Meanwhile, its approach to drug crime, in conjunction with its frequent references to the Vietnam War, can be read as a message of support for a politically conservative approach to policing. This is achieved through a general disavowal of the reality of the 1980s, which ultimately leads to the image of Roger Murtaugh and his family serving anything but black empowerment. On the contrary, *Lethal Weapon* offers a vision of reality precisely the same as the one espoused by followers of the Blue Lives Matter movement today. This vision is predicated on two assumptions: (1) police officers are colorblind, i.e. ignorant of the concept of race, and (2) any means they employ in the pursuit of crime is justified. *Lethal Weapon* perfectly fits what Lee Artz writes in his analysis of the buddy action genre, as it "effectively reinforce[s] existing racial hegemony because couched within the myriad representations and readings of interracial images lies a clear message that presents the American status quo as preferred and

natural."[10] Perhaps most disturbingly, this reinforcement is contingent upon one of its protagonists being black.

When the audience is introduced to said black protagonist, police sergeant Roger Murtaugh (who is, noticeably, the first of the two protagonists to be introduced), he is celebrating his 50th birthday with his family. They live in a large suburban house, and a boat in their driveway attests to them being rather well-off.

The other protagonist, white police sergeant Martin Riggs, is in his mid-30s and lives with a dog in a trailer by the beach and is suicidal, deranged after the death of his wife. Following the genre's conventions, Murtaugh and Riggs could not be more different. The one difference which never appears to matter to either of them is the color of their skin. As Robyn Wiegman notes in her excellent analysis of narratives of male bonding:

> *Lethal Weapon* manipulates race through its absence, "purifying" the scene of interracial bonding by wholly excluding its most basic assumption; displacing difference into less volatile formations such as age, lifestyle, and mental health, *Lethal Weapon* posits a scene of cultural origin that depicts no racial fragmentation, no potential disruption of the bond because of imbalances in racial power.[11]

Indeed, the concept of race does not seem to exist in the world of *Lethal Weapon*, a logic indicative of 1980s conservatism (colorblindness was often used in arguments against affirmative action), rather than of a progressive desire to transcend race, a desire borne of the civil rights movement.

The single initial tie between Riggs and Murtaugh (aside from the fact that both are policemen), is their shared experience of the war in Vietnam. How significant is this plot detail, though? As Hazel Carby points out, "[it] is the history of the desegregation

of the United States armed forces and the 'policing' of Southeast Asia that enables the relationship of equality between Martin Riggs and Roger Murtaugh."[12] Even though they did not fight together, Vietnam is presented as the common ground they both share. Such a claim, however, already points to *Lethal Weapon's* colorblindness. The filmmakers seem to implicitly assume that the protagonists' memories of war would be ones that would unite them, when in reality a black soldiers' experience of Vietnam was often vastly different from a white one's, due to racism in the army. To illustrate this, during the first two years of the war, black soldiers made up 20% of the United States' forces' total casualties, even though black people comprised only about 11% of the country's population.[13] Here however, the memory of the war appears to help the protagonists bond as men and forget about race: Riggs and Murtaugh do not need to see each other as different, because the war taught them both that it was the Vietnamese who were different. The movie makes this point when it introduces the minor character of a Southeast Asian torturer (employed by the antagonists), who attempts to extract information from a captured Riggs, vividly invoking images of the Vietnam War's atrocities.

Even disregarding colorblindness, such a strategy seems problematic. Calling upon the shared experience of a past war as a basis for the protagonists' relationship betrays an unwillingness to address the impact that contemporary circumstances could have on it. One could perhaps go further by saying that relying on a racial third party to bring together white and black heroes betrays more than a little skepticism about their ability to do so on their own.

It is, however, not only the film's protagonists who are rooted in the Vietnam war. The criminals they are pursuing are a drug

cartel run by ex-US military personnel, who capitalized on their Vietnam connections to smuggle heroin. The references to Vietnam are also apparent on a visual level, not only in the aforementioned torture scene, but also during the film's climax, where, as Hazel Carby points out, "the rain-soaked muddy fields of Vietnam are explicitly evoked," in a fight on a water-drenched lawn.[14] Considering how frequently *Lethal Weapon* refers to the Vietnam War, it may be productive to consider the film on an intertextual level, in comparison to pictures that portray the conflict directly, specifically those which depict relations between white and black soldiers. Brian Woodman has charted the interesting trajectory of how the representation of African American soldiers changed over time in Hollywood movies about the Vietnam war.[15] While the noticeably conservative *Green Berets* (1968), starring and directed by John Wayne, featured only a token black character, another black soldier, although problematically stereotyped, becomes the leader of the unit fighting in *The Boys in Company C* (1978). Later films – like *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), or *Hamburger Hill* (1987) – depict the discrimination suffered by black soldiers at the hands of the army as a whole (e. g. black soldiers being much more likely to be assigned the most dangerous duties) and in some cases also acknowledged the casual racism they faced, while also becoming more critical of the war in general. None of these realities are acknowledged in *Lethal Weapon.*

Although its buddy dynamic is markedly different from the more group-oriented one of a war movie, it is still interesting to consider how those depictions are echoed and transformed in *Lethal Weapon*. Figuratively speaking, we might ask in which Vietnam war film Roger Murtaugh could have fought. The simplistic construction of the film's world, its colorblindness, as well as the fact that it is the more aggressive Riggs who usually leads the protagonist duo, perhaps surprisingly, but certainly tellingly, all appear to link *Lethal Weapon* to the movie furthest

from it in time. Murtaugh seems to echo the character of Doc McGee (Raymond St. Jacques), the black medic from *Green Berets*, not only due to the various traits already mentioned, but also because of the specific social positions they both occupy in their respective fictional worlds. As Woodman notes, the role of a medic "would require some education, thus allowing for the appearance of social advancement for African Americans on the screen,"[16] just as Murtaugh's house and boat seem to signify socio-economic success. Woodman offers the following characterization of McGee's role within *Green Beret's* narrative: "Doc is never allowed to develop into anything more than a hybrid of the Tom serving at the side of John Wayne, and the purely-intentioned, patriotic ebony saint who extols the right-wing propaganda that Wayne wished to disseminate in his film."[17] As will be shown later on, though Murtaugh is definitely not a token character and does not directly exhibit the stereotypes of an Uncle Tom or an ebony saint, he ultimately helps fulfill a narrative role similar to that of McGee's.

Regardless of intertextual context, the Vietnam background seems to play a significant part in the construction of *Lethal Weapon*: the film effectively portrays the war on drugs as a displaced Vietnam War. Both sides of the film's conflict are former soldiers who fought in that conflict. The fact that they once stood on the same side notwithstanding, this can be seen as justification for transforming the war on drugs on screen into a militaristic engagement, sanctioning the use of any force necessary. Thus, *Lethal Weapon* may be said to support a firm police approach to the war on drugs, one which, considering the real-world referent of those affected by the actual war on drugs – predominantly impoverished inner-city black youths – raises serious questions about the film's ideological affiliation. What is then perhaps most problematic is the way film tries to legitimize racist politics by portraying Roger Murtaugh as unreservedly

engaged in the struggle.

The Los Angeles depicted in *Lethal Weapon* appears, however, to be crafted in a way which deters the viewer from asking such questions by detaching drugs and crime from the issue of the treatment of race in American society. For it is difficult not to notice that, aside from the Asian torturer, the cartel Riggs and Murtaugh are fighting is almost monochrome – all of its remaining members are white, save for a token black man who appears on screen for only a dozen seconds. A small ring of drug dealers whom Riggs dispatches in one of his introductory scenes is, meanwhile, exclusively white. Finally, the opening sequence of the movie features an almost nude, young, white girl, taking drugs and committing suicide. Virtually all the criminals who appear in *Lethal Weapon* are white, while all the crime depicted is drug-related. The film presents a reality in stark contrast to the media of the time, where it was black people who dealt in and consumed drugs. It also highlights their decadence visually when the camera cuts from the dead body of the girl in the opening scene – a girl who, it later turns out, came from a wealthy upper-class family – to a suburban street and immediately to the similarly naked body of Richard Murtaugh in a bathtub, about to be presented with a birthday cake by his family.

While distancing the problem of drugs from black communities could lead us to consider *Lethal Weapon* to be progressive, the fact that almost all its criminals (and therefore also all the people the police ever chase) are white is in fact indicative of an attempt to disavow reality. For while the crack cocaine craze had racist undertones, black communities of the United States did face real problems in the late 1980s. Michelle Alexander notes that "in the early 1980s, just as the drug war was kicking off, inner-city communities were suffering from economic collapse,"[18] while by 1987 "the industrial employment of black men had plummeted to 28 percent"[19] from over 70 percent in 1970. *Lethal Weapon* engages in escapism by removing from its fictional world all

possible points of problematic racial tension. This escapism undercuts any potentially progressive message on race resulting from one of its protagonists being black. However, escapism may not be the most accurate term here, as can be seen when comparing the film with other contemporary buddy action productions. *Beverly Hills Cop II* (1987), released only a couple of months after *Lethal Weapon*, or *Die Hard* (1988) – both of which, incidentally, also take place in Los Angeles – pitch their heroes against robbers/arms dealers, and robbers/foreign terrorists, respectively. *Lethal Weapon*'s reliance on domestic drug dealers, white though they may be, places the film too close to real problems of its time for it to be considered to be merely escapist. This is why the term used in this paper is *disavowal* – a word that suggests ideological intention rather than simply avoidance of an ideological issue.

The movie's treatment of its black protagonist also does not seem indicative of attempts to escape from questions of race, but rather to strictly control them. The character of Roger Murtaugh is himself constructed in a way which ensures he will not disturb the hegemonic social order. His qualities, such as caution and unwillingness to resort to violence, are not only usually considered positive, but also set him apart from black stereotypes. Within action film logic, however, these traits, along with his older age and marital status, are transformed into signs of emasculation in relation to his younger partner. As Jacquie Jones bluntly puts it, "robbed of all traces of ethnicity or real sexuality, Danny Glover's character in that film holds all the appeal of a fast-food job for an inner-city youth faced with the prospects of drug peddling."[20]

A similarly emasculating treatment is afforded to *Die Hard*'s black co-star, Sergeant Al Powell (Reginald VelJohnson), who does not take part in most of the film's action, instead supporting the white hero over a radio. As Yvonne Tasker describes him, "Powell is the personification of the good-natured, chubby cop,"[21]

his accidental shooting of a young kid leaving him unwilling to use his gun. Tasker further comments that "in terms both of established traditions of representation of black masculinity, and the iconography of the action cinema, Powell's refusal to fire a gun signals his emasculated status."[22] Unlike Powell, Murtaugh is ready to fire his gun if the situation requires it, but a similar logic is nonetheless at play in *Lethal Weapon*. In addition to the signs of emasculation mentioned earlier, the film features a scene at a firing range, initially showing Murtaugh to be a good shot, only to allow Riggs to demonstrate that he is an even better one (he shoots Murtaugh's original target, but hits it more times, from a greater distance and with greater precision). The limit to interracial friendship appears to be the mere possibility of a black man's superior ability to use guns. Racial blindness notwithstanding, shooting is the white man's domain.

This parallel is interesting considering that both films feature strikingly similar scenes in their finales. At the end of their long fight against crime their respective interracial pairs embrace. Suddenly, an antagonist seemingly comes back to life in one case, or manages to escape from policemen holding him in the other, threatening to shoot the heroes in the back. In both cases the villain is gunned down, in *Lethal Weapon* by both the protagonists, still locked in an embrace, and in *Die Hard* by Powell himself, after having already let go of his partner. It seems that both Murtaugh and Powell need to be emasculated in order to be allowed to embrace their white partners safely (that is, without threatening their films with homoerotic energy resulting from the interaction of two potent male bodies). At the same time, their emasculation allows the masculine energies of their white partners to restore their

propensity for violence.

Alternatively, it could be argued that *Lethal Weapon* presents a model black man that would be a welcome member of the forces of hegemonic order represented by the police and situated within the middle class. Murtaugh's emasculation could then be considered the price that his family pays for its socio-economic success. This success is itself part of Murtaugh's construction and is presented in a rather questionable way. Ed Guerrero writes that thanks to the fact that "the Black cop has a family and home, and his relationship to them is explored [...] his character is broadened and humanized beyond Hollywood convention."[23] However, *Lethal Weapon*'s portrayal of a black family appears to serve another purpose: it safely contains aspirations of black people by aligning them with hegemonic values. For, as must be pointed out, the Murtaughs are not contextualized within any community, black or otherwise. The family's defining characteristic is its suburban and upper-middle-class character. Such social and geographical placement – away from the economic problems of inner-city communities – once again reduces blackness purely to skin color. Phillipa Gates concludes her analysis of this trope in crime and action films by saying that "Hollywood, thus, uses the space of the middle class to contain the black detective hero by aligning him with mainstream values and hegemonic power."[24] It is from this position of alignment that Richard Murtaugh protects the city of Los Angeles from crime. The fear of relating the Murtaughs to domestic black communities seems so great that the single feeble attempt to connect them to any racial context that the movie makes ends up referencing another continent. A barely visible sign on their refrigerator reads "FREE SOUTH AFRICA END APARTHEID."

Its faintness is, in fact, such that even if noticed, the sign only highlights the Murtaughs' estrangement from any black community and the film's disavowal of race in general. To call, again, upon Robyn Wiegman, "the specter of individual bourgeois success becomes the reigning sign of a world beyond difference."[25]

Interestingly, the displacement of the movie's black lead is addressed in one comedic scene. The two protagonists are trying to negotiate information from a group of black children living in a poor neighborhood. When Murtaugh tries asking one of them questions, the others tell him not to answer, or he will be arrested. A few more questions follow and the children start asking whether the black policeman kills people. When he replies that he only shoots bad people in the leg to stop them, one of the children states: "Mama says policemen shoot black people." At this point the conversation is stopped by a chorus of children wanting to know whether that is true, while Riggs chuckles to one side. Considering how close this particular scene comes to asking politically relevant and deeply uncomfortable questions, it is worth analyzing it in more detail. It is clearly intended to be comedic: not only are the two veteran policemen shown as having trouble dealing with children, but also – given the number of gunfights and people killed in *Lethal Weapon* – it is clear that the protagonists do not really bother aiming for the legs. The scene also plays part in the already discussed dynamic between Riggs and Murtaugh, as Murtaugh indeed does not use his gun as freely as Riggs does.

None of the scene's humor addresses the children's actual question, which is tied to the racial reality of the war on drugs. Are the police prejudiced against people of color? The filmmakers do not allow the policemen to answer and the situation is

diffused when the children are offered ice-cream. The problem of systemic police racism is thus disavowed. The audience can clearly see that the young boy's mom was wrong: the police do not need to concern themselves with black people as almost no black criminals appear in *Lethal Weapon* (unlike black policemen, of whom the audience sees several). What makes the scene even more questionable is what images it draws on. Consider the children's antics: climbing on a car to look at a burning house; one boy warns another "Don't tell them your name, Alfred!", for which he receives a smack on the head from a third one; covering another boy's mouth to stop him from telling the policemen his age, while reflexively telling them his age himself. All these are likely to remind viewers of pickaninnies – a racist stereotype of savage-like black children, originating in the nineteenth century and featured in dozens of silent movies and Hollywood classics. Thus, the scene juxtaposes a black policeman who wholly represents the hegemonic social order with the traditional racist personification of black ignorance in a humorous dispute regarding whether the police are prejudiced against people of color.

Potential racial tension becomes conflated with comedy in another context when Riggs, invited to dinner in Murtaugh's home, meets his teenage daughter Rianne (Traci Wolfe). The girl develops an instant attraction towards him, though it leads to nothing more than her dreamily staring at him and his slight embarrassment. Jacquie Jones contextualizes this scene within a process of desexualization of the black male:

> Given the absence of a Black male figure other than Glover, this attraction can be seen as "normal," in that it adheres to the rules of heterosexuality. Moreover, given the dynamic of

> the White male lead as physically and ethically supreme, the young girl's attraction to Gibson functions as hegemonic wish-fulfillment.[26]

Rianne's attraction serves no actual purpose in the movie's plot, it does not develop into any kind of romance between the characters. Even more than that, the audience knows from the start that it cannot develop into anything at all, since Riggs is still caught up in a relationship with the proverbial ghost of his wife. The film thus follows the conventions of the action movie genre, according to which the male lead is naturally attractive and that attractiveness is affirmed by the female characters he encounters. But the scene also partakes in *Lethal Weapon*'s strategy of disavowing race and its ideology of colorblindness. For, in this case, the specific way that this genre convention plays out is that a black man invites his white friend home, so that his black daughter may be attracted to him. The "natural" genre dynamic is then compounded with a racial one, though the latter can be easily disavowed, by calling back to the former.

Proof of this strategy's effectiveness on a white viewer is Roger Ebert saying that "Traci Wolfe, as Glover's good-looking daughter, is cute when she gets a teenage crush on Gibson"[27] in his review of the movie. Remarkably, thanks to the girl's "cuteness", the racial dynamic of the scene remains ignored. What, however, happens when one refuses to be colorblind and stops to consider the scene in light of the meaning that the idea of race has in American culture? Rianne's attraction for Riggs and her advances to him can be seen as evocative of another staple character of the racist imaginary: the black temptress, the stereotypical Jezebel, a character who, in the words of Patricia Hill Collins, was meant to "provide a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by white

men typically reported by Black slave women."[28]

The most racially loaded part of the film, however, is its climax. After a brutal brawl with the secondary antagonist, Mr. Joshua (Gary Busey), on a water-drenched lawn, an exhausted and bleeding Riggs falls into Murtaugh's arms. When the defeated Joshua manages to get hold of a careless policeman's gun, the two, still embracing, unload their guns on him (or the viewer, bearing in mind the POV perspective used) finally killing him. Although Ames calls the scene "a phallic finale in which the intense homosocial bond explodes in an orgasmic shared slaying,"[29] Wiegman considers the entire sequence to be a final confirmation of a white body's superiority over a black one. As she says, through Riggs's and Murtaugh's embrace, "the white masculine must recuperate its own site of privilege by allowing the black man to take on symbolically the power of the white phallus, to appropriate its evocation of masculine sexuality and power."[30] Since the filmmakers used slow-motion to enable the audience to see that it is Riggs who fires first, "the scene charts the mastery of the white body, its ultimate phallic authority, while trying to displace it in the fusion of an interracial configuration."[31]

This reading of *Lethal Weapon*'s finale as part of the film's strategy of containing the black body does not preclude also locating it within Fiedler's tradition of white men escaping from society into wilderness (and, more specifically, from adulthood and matrimony), into the often literal embrace of a man of color. Unlike Melville's Queequeg or Twain's Jim, Murtaugh welcomes the deranged Riggs back into society, while the primal wilderness of the open sea or of the Mississippi River is in *Lethal Weapon* substituted for the urban wilderness of Los Angeles. Still the core of the structure remains intact: Riggs is trying to escape from the spirit of his dead wife, and it is Murtaugh's embrace which gives him that escape. In the scene immediately following their embrace, we see Riggs lay flowers at

his wife's grave.

That climactic sequence is where the ideological work of *Lethal Weapon* – its project of affirming colorblindness and justifying police violence through a discourse of heroic masculinity – is best visible. Even though the protagonists' racial difference goes unmentioned throughout the entire movie, its ending evokes one of the longest-running traditions of portraying it, threatening to betray the whole endeavor. For the final outcome of the movie's fantasy echoes Fiedler's words:

> Our dark-skinned beloved will take us in, we assure ourselves, when we have been cut off, or have cut ourselves off, from all others, without rancor or the insult of forgiveness. He will fold us in his arms saying, "Honey" or "Aikane"; he will comfort us, as if our offense against him were long ago remitted, were never truly *real.*[32]

The white cop finds his salvation in the arms of a black cop, whom he has never noticed to be black, in a world where his dark-skinned beloved does not have anything to forgive him for. The fight that they fought together, however, is full of racially implied wrongs in the real world. Thus, the scene seems to serve as both a final act of ensuring that a black body will keep the hegemonic order (i.e. remain subordinated to a white body), and as a final validation of colorblind unity in their approach to crime.

To conclude, this paper has shown that the film's handling of the issue of race is not only deeply conservative, but representative of an effort to disavow race in the context of drug related crime, at a moment in US history when racist policies took the form of "the war on drugs". An effort was clearly made to sterilize *Lethal Weapon*'s plot by presenting a world with no points of potential racial tension, and when that tension

still found its way in, its treatment was timid at best. Ultimately, both the seemingly progressive association of drug crime with the white upper class, and the usage of decidedly less progressive tropes, like the displacement of the black family, or the automatic sexual attraction of a young black girl to an older white man, can be seen to have served not to tackle the issue of race, but rather to disavow it.

This paper has also argued that the film's reliance on references to Vietnam is problematic. While it could simply be read as a part of the construction of masculinity as seen in the film's characters (though that is itself vital to transgressing race through masculinity), the film effectively reconfigures American history, placing the source of a black man's emancipation not in the Civil Rights Movement, but in the Vietnam War, or rather, a right-wing re-imagining of the Vietnam War. At the same time, the movie's persistent conflating of that war with the war on drugs is indicative of a highly uncompromising stance regarding the complicated problems that the United States faced in the late 1980s. Thus, the blackness of one of its protagonists is a central element in *Lethal Weapon*'s conservative message. For not only is Roger Murtaugh (and his entire family) rooted firmly in the hegemonic social order, his engagement in the fight against crime provides the strongest possible support for distancing it from the issue of race. Clearly, if one cop is black and the other white, then how can the police be in any way racist?

This seems to be a question that a large section of US society is unwilling to answer even thirty years later. In the meantime, the black cop has been joined by a black president of the United States, among a number of other high-ranking officials of color. This development did not stop a white policeman from killing George Floyd in broad daylight, even when he knew he was being filmed. Floyd's death, of course, is merely a symbol here. Racism, systemic or otherwise, is pervasive, and it can adapt to changing

times. *Lethal Weapon*'s disavowal of race supplied a vision perfectly suited to the process of adapting racism to the reality of the 1980s, and that process is what shaped the modern system of racial inequality and police violence in the United States.

It is ironic that the film's audience is treated similarly to the children asking its protagonists about police racism. Although the conflict shown on screen cannot, in truth, be discussed without mentioning race, when the audience encounters any point of potential racial tension, that tension is swiftly disavowed. Just as the children's questions are stopped by ice-cream, so too are those that the audience may have (or, at least, they are intended to be stopped) by the sensational plot, special effects, comedy and the innocent glory of male friendship. Meanwhile, the film's colorblindness renders such words as "racism", and even "race", meaningless. If there is no concept of race, then it does not matter that the film's antagonists happen to be white. The police do not shoot black people, they shoot *bad* people, regardless of the color of their skin. *Lethal Weapon*'s relentless colorblindness validates an uncompromising approach to policing and its underlying logic remains a powerful force in American society in 2020: racial violence continues to be justified through a disavowal of race.

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