American Me. Dir. Edward James Olmos. Perf. Edward James Olmos, William Forsyth, and Sal Lopez. Universal Pictures, 1992. Film.

When *American Me* was released in 1992 it showcased gangs in US inner cities. The 1990s, a decade of rapid economic growth but turbulent social relations, saw gang tensions and media attention rise at fever pitch rates. As the film notes, in its closing credits, 1991 saw more than 3000 gang related deaths. This number sets the stage for race-relations is 1990s America. Upon their release these films served as important social message venues, and twenty years later they have become time capsules showing the benefits and downside of age, progress, social avoidance.

American Me also served as Edward James Olmos' directorial debut, who received an Academy Award nomination for *Stand and Deliver* (1988). In many ways *American Me* is Olmos' yin to *Stand and Deliver's* Yang. These films stood to capture the turmoil within a generation, in the seemingly lost youth, of America's allies and side streets.

Stand and Deliver grappled with the problems of Latino youth in East Los Angeles, showing community challenges which included high achieving students having to fight against poverty, the influence of gangs and family pressure to drop out of school and work. This positive and uplifting film honed in on a community triumph as Jamie Escalante (Olmos) inspired an unprecedented number of students at Garfield High School to pass the AP Calculus exam. The movie leaves the viewer inspired about the future of East LA in that the desperation, poverty, and gang torn streets could be won back and re-birthed in a productive and functional manner.

American Me is the opposite of that; it is dark and hopeless. The film begins with the struggles facing Mexican Americans during World War II and the Zoot Suit Riots. The first of many problems with the film is that it glosses over these marked issues of race during the heyday of America's Golden Age. The Zoot Suit Riots and the racial tension that plagued California, following the attack on Pearl Harbor, were all too real problems. Yet, Olmos chooses to pay lip service denoting these race filled street tensions as a mere (or perhaps minor) catalyst on his path to the gang issues infesting East LA in the late 1950s. If the rise of the Mexican Mafia really began with the Zoot Suits Riots then the thread between the 1943 part of the film and the 1959 part of the films needs to be more clear,

as it is it feels like the mention of the Zoot Suit Riots is only done out of obligation. Astute viewers will capitalize upon this overlooked sociological connection, but history by Hollywood's eye has failed the general public by not providing a visual sounding board to connect these analytical dots.

As the film moves a long it has every cliché for a crime film encompassed by urban space and race. Teenagers making bad decisions? Check. A male rape scene in the prison? Check. Drugs being run in a prison? Check? Brothers killing brothers? Check. Another male rape scene in a prison? Check.

The film attempts to introduce a female character during the brief time Pedro Santana is out of prison. A single mom named Julie (Evelina Fernández) enters the proverbial viewing space. Yet, her use is superficial at best as her role is undefined and largely unexplored. Is Julie supposed to be Santana's savior? The voiceover wants to make her that but their relationship is not developed enough to make the viewer believe she can earnestly change him. Then, as a final assault the banal failure of this character, the final moments film reveal Julie covering up her gang markings with makeup. This transfiguration, even temporary, casts a sinister glow on Julie... she is not as innocent as she seems, or as strong, as Julie was pulled into the problems of East LA in her youth.

Olmos is well intentioned, but the fact that *American Me* was his directorial debut shows. The filmmaking is basic. The main character of Santana (Olmos) is very unsympathetic and the film relies on voice overs and old photographs to try to make the audience care for him. It just does not work. If we had been able to see more of the challenges that Santana faced in the years between 1943 and 1959 maybe we could understand his motivations. All we really know is he has to have respect and power, but the ascension to this power is missing ... perhaps there was a crucial moment during the Zoot Suit Riots that frame him. Perhaps. The missing narration on Santana is only a fraction of the fallibilities of this film. The score is over the top, some of the editing choices (specifically) involving the second male rape scene are bizarre, and the use of slow motion at the climax of the film actually takes the viewer out of the moment and makes what should be heart wrenching nearly laughable. In the twenty years since this film, cable shows like *Sons of Anarchy* or silver screen films like *Kill Bill* excessive violence would seem norm, yet within the storyline of *American*

Me — even twenty years into a more graphically violent culture — these scenes assault the viewer and leave no clear purpose.

The film wants to be anti-violence and anti-gang but it fails here as well. Pride, honor, and respect are dominant parts of Latin male culture. The film does a fantastic job of portraying these notions. However, that — in and of itself — is part of the problem. It does such a good job that a young Latino male who is at risk of joining a gang would likely see this film as pro-violence and pro-gang. He would see the power Santana has and not understand the drawbacks. There is only one male character who is not in a gang, and all the viewer knows about him is when shows up at a party wearing a tie and he thinks his "shit doesn't stink because he's going to college." Perhaps the film might have had a bigger impact if we had seen a little more of him; you see a touch of his struggle to escape the problems of East LA, but instead the Latino male with an education is reduced to a punchline of an afterthought.

The film ends up endorsing the very behavior that it is trying to condemn. Where *Boyz n the Hood* was so good at showing the horrors of non-gang members in South Central Los Angeles this film fails that in near every aspect. Every character of note is, or was, associated with a gang in some way. Thus, they are all responsible for the problems of their community. Perhaps that was Olmos' point from the start, but it leaves the film without a heart. The viewer, or this one at least, is still left with a discombobulated view.

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