CULTURE & MEDIA

∾

Małgorzata Mączko

Jagiellonian University, Poland
malgorzata.maczko@doctoral.uj.edu.pl
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9226-8906

Black Lives Matter on Screen: Trauma of Witnessing Police Brutality in Contemporary American Cinema

Abstract. In the years following the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, American cinema was looking for a way to appropriately address the issue of police brutality against people of color. Film-makers, often inspired by real-life events, began developing stories focused on the trauma of witnessing lethal police violence. Three films released in 2018 – *Blindspotting* (dir. Carlos López Estrada), *Monsters and Men* (dir. Reinaldo Marcus Green) and *The Hate U Give* (dir. George Tillman Jr.)– emphasize how the aftermath of such experiences affects young people of color and their communities. This article aims to explore the role of witness testimony in trauma-centered narratives and examine how the contemporary American cinema visualizes racial trauma. To achieve that, the films will be analyzed within the context of trauma studies, including theories regarding both individual and cultural trauma. More-over, studies focused on the socialization of Black children will help demonstrate the transgenerational impact of trauma. All three films share common motifs: they represent the psychosomatic aspects of trauma through similar cinematic techniques and see value in witness testimony, even if it requires personal sacrifices from the protagonists. They also portray parents' worry about their children's future within a prejudiced system and the struggle to prepare them for it. All these issues have been previously addressed in the public and academic discourse and are now being reflected in cinema. Film proves to be a suitable medium for representing trauma of witnessing police brutality and cinema will most likely remain a vital part of the debate about dismantling racist systems for years to come.

Keywords: American cinema, Black Lives Matter, police brutality, trauma, witnessing

When a new social trend or a movement forms, cinema begins to look for ways of representing it on the silver screen. Recent developments in the American sociopolitical landscape, including the Black Lives Matter movement's rise to prominence in the early 2010s, present a unique set of challenges for filmmakers who want to appropriately depict them. To avoid the oversimplification of a complex and delicate subject matter, they often choose stories about protagonists whose individual experiences are emblematic of a larger problem. One of the emerging tropes in contemporary American cinema, influenced by the ongoing protests against racially motivated violence, are stories that focus on the trauma of witnessing fatal police shootings. Three recent films, all released in 2018 and inspired by real-life events, use this narrative to emphasize how the aftermath of traumatic experiences affects young people of color and their communities. A brief analysis of common motifs in *Blindspotting* (dir. Carlos López Estrada), *Monsters and Men* (dir. Reinaldo Marcus Green), and *The Hate U Give* (dir. George Tillman Jr.) will help explore the role of witness testimony in trauma-centered narratives and examine how contemporary American cinema visualizes individual and racial trauma, as well as its intergenerational implications.

1. History of a Movement

The name of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement first appeared as a hashtag on Twitter in 2013. It was created by a group of activists, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman. Zimmerman, a member of a neighborhood watch, fatally shot an unarmed African American teenager, Trayvon Martin, in February 2012. A year later, the BLM movement gained national recognition, following widespread protests against police brutality and racially motivated violence. The tensions escalated over a period of several weeks and led to the Ferguson riots, prompted by the killing of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014. To this day, the movement remains a vital part of American and international sociopolitical discourse, having received global support in the wake of the most recent wave of protests in the summer of 2020, after the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. BLM is a decentralized movement and a part of a larger drive against the prevalence of racism in America and other countries. Apart from activism in the physical world, BLM relies on its social media presence. The hashtag is used to spread awareness, organize protests and fundraisers, put pressure on authorities, and to hold them accountable. It also gives a platform to the witnesses of violence who use it to share evidence and first-hand accounts of instances of racism and police brutality. This, in turn, leads to increased visibility of such cases.

The events discussed under the hashtag, often presented in the form of video footage recorded on mobile devices and virally shared, are intuitively perceived as traumatic for both the witnesses and their communities. The language of trauma is used by local activists and journalists alike – in a recent video on "Black exhaustion" they speak of

"a recurring nightmare" and built-up trauma of being disappointed in the justice system that repeatedly fails to indict perpetrators of police violence (BBC News 2021b). When American filmmakers depict cases of police brutality in their films, they also choose similar motifs and adjust cinematic techniques to best represent these themes. The narratives centering on life-altering violent events and their aftermath should be analyzed within the theoretical framework of trauma studies.

2. Trauma Theory and Cinema

Studies on trauma, originating in psychology, have been successfully adapted and used in the humanities as well. Trauma theory, which gained recognition in the 1990s and was heavily influenced by the works of Sigmund Freud, has spread to various disciplines, from literature to film and new media studies, allowing scholars to analyze stories of individual and collective psychological injury.

In the introductory remarks to one of the early key works on trauma theory, *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth explains the mechanisms of individual trauma. Going back to the Greek origins of the term, she describes psychological trauma as a "wound of the mind" (Caruth 1996, 3), one that differs from experiencing bodily harm. It is characterized by a period of latency, occurring between the original event and its later return to "haunt" the survivor. This kind of belated experience is difficult to rationalize or assimilate, causing a disruption to daily life. For this reason, such scholars as Caruth and Dori Laub believe that trauma itself is difficult to represent or even is unrepresentable. E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang (2004) agree that there are two main legitimate concerns in representing trauma, both connected to aestheticization: of politics and of trauma of the Other, in which modern traumas may be respectively "elevated into a spectacle for emulation and consumption" (Kaplan and Wang 2004, 11) or trivialized, homogenized and sanitized. However, the authors contend that

> "to come to terms with traumatic memory, and more importantly, to make a critical use of it to shed light on the chronically trauma-producing social structures so as to forge the will to change them, it is necessary that a choice be made between inadequate telling and relegating of trauma to a mystified silence." (Kaplan and Wang 2004, 12)

Creators of the three films analyzed in the latter part of this article choose the risk of inadequacy over silence and focus their attention on representing the aftermath of traumatic experiences.

Attempts at representing trauma are particularly important in the narratives that center on types of trauma which have not always been recognized as such – including the impact of racism on mental health, currently known in psychology as racial trauma or race-based traumatic stress. Over the years, multiple scholars have pointed out that experiences of racism should be recognized and addressed in psychology because they

are a crucial factor in the mental well-being of people of color. Raymond Monsour Scurfield and David W. Mackey note that "the impact of exposure to traumatic or stressful race-related experiences may be a critical etiological factor in a client's presenting problems, especially in considering a diagnosis of (…) adjustment and stress disorders" (Scurfield and Mackey 2001, 24), while Thema Bryant-Davis and Carlota Ocampo (2005) point to parallels between the experiences of racist incidents and other events perceived as traumatic – rape and domestic violence. Janet E. Helms, Guerda Nicolas, and Carlton E. Green further differentiate between the "direct racial or ethnic cultural cataclysmic events" and "vicarious events" (Helms, Nicolas and Green 2010, 55–56), which are rooted in the act of witnessing racist incidents secondhandedly but still inducing trauma. Currently, racial trauma is discussed in relation to mental health's impact of the recent protests against police brutality (First et al. 2020). Racial trauma research is a promising context for analyzing BLM-inspired, trauma-centered narratives. It is important to supplement humanities' general trauma theory with additional sources that recognize the relevance of racial identity and the current and historical specifics of race relations in American society.

3. #BlackLivesMatter on Film

The ongoing struggle against racism in the United States influences various artists, from painters to sculptors, who immortalize key figures of the movement in their art and create symbolic depictions of the current events. Among those inspired to capture BLM's importance are American filmmakers who take varying approaches to portraying the movement in feature films and documentaries. Some of them focus on specific problems and may have a high social and cultural impact, such as Ava DuVernay's critically acclaimed documentary, *13th* (2016), which tackles the issue of race in the United States criminal justice system and mass incarceration. It received renewed attention in the wake of George Floyd's murder in 2020 (Nolan 2020). Still, cinema's most common first reaction to instances of injustice is hastily made television documentaries as almost every high-profile case of police brutality eventually becomes the subject of one. They are released soon after the original event and often use real footage of the incidents, such as police bodycam footage and videos recorded by the bystanders. The films also include interviews with families, local activists, residents, and lawmakers. Their development is considered time-sensitive as they attempt to capture the events as they happen – short documentaries analyzing the killings of Breonna Taylor (*The New York Times Presents. Episode 4: The Killing of Breonna Taylor*, 2020, dir. Yoruba Richen) and George Floyd (*8 Minutes and 46 Seconds: The Killing of George Floyd*, 2020, prod./dir. Gilberte Phanor, Toby Sculthorp) were released in a matter of months. Other documentaries connected to the Black Lives Matter movement include, among others: *Stay Woke: The Black Lives Matter Movement* (2016, dir. Laurens Grant), *Say Her Name: The Life and Death of Sandra Bland* (2018, dir. David Heilbroner, Kate

Davis), as well as a six-part documentary television series, *Rest in Power: The Trayvon Martin Story* (2018, dir. Jenner Furst, Julia Willoughby Nason).

Key feature films inspired by BLM started to appear soon after, but the subject of police brutality is not a new one for American cinema. One of the early examples of feature films depicting police brutality is *Fruitvale Station* (2013, dir. Ryan Coogler[1]), based on the 2009 killing of Oscar Grant. Unlike later examples, Coogler's film focuses solely on the victim of the shooting, following Grant's footsteps in the hours leading up to his death. It also features authentic video footage of the killing, recorded by the witnesses and later circulated in the media.

The recurring pattern of witnesses documenting instances of police brutality is also present in the films analyzed in the latter part of this article. Each of them offers a slightly different approach to the issue of witnessing police brutality but there are noticeable similarities in their structure and in the themes they choose to explore.

Oscar Grant's death was the source of inspiration for one of them. Seeing the media coverage of this case affected Angie Thomas, a young author, who, at the time, was working on her first YA novel on police brutality seen through the eyes of a teenager, *The Hate U Give*. The debut garnered a lot of attention from publishing houses due to its timely subject matter. It then went on to take the top spot of *The New York Times* bestseller list. Interestingly, the rights to adapt Thomas' novel into a film had been acquired by Fox Searchlight a year prior to the book's official release. The main character, 16-year-old Starr Carter (Amandla Stenberg), lives in a Black neighborhood of Garden Heights but attends a white private school where she assumes a non-confrontational stance. Despite her parents' efforts to give her a safe and comfortable life, Starr unexpectedly experiences a highly traumatic event – she witnesses the killing of her childhood friend, Khalil, during a routine traffic stop. As the only eyewitness of the shooting, despite fear and intimidation, she decides to brave the public scrutiny and testifies in front of a grand jury. When the jury fails to indict the police officer responsible for Khalil's death, she joins violent protests against the verdict.

Out of the three films discussed in this article, the one that offers the most multi-faceted, varied portrayal of the issue of police brutality is *Monsters and Men* (2018). It tells three intersecting stories, tied together by a traumatic event – the death of a Black man, reminiscent of the real-life killing of Eric Garner. Each part focuses on a distinctive character affected by it. Manny (Anthony Ramos), a young father, is a di-

---

[1] Coogler went on to direct the first Marvel Cinematic Universe superhero film with a Black main character – the critically acclaimed *Black Panther* (2018). Despite drawing some criticism (Gathara 2018, Lebron 2018), the film was widely praised as a milestone for the representation of African Americans in cinema and remains a relevant point of reference in the public discourse on this topic. Prior to the film's release, Jamil Smith noted that "this rapidly expanding reckoning—one that reflects the importance of representation in our culture—is long overdue. *Black Panther* is poised to prove to Hollywood that African-American narratives have the power to generate profits from all audiences. And, more important, that making movies about black lives is part of showing that they matter" (Smith 2018).

rect witness of this event. He records it on his phone and later posts the footage online, for which he is harassed by the police and eventually arrested on fabricated charges. Then, the narrative centers on Dennis (John David Washington), an NYPD officer who tries to reconcile his professional law enforcement experiences with what he experiences off-duty as a Black man, when he sees police powers exploited and is frequently subjected to racial profiling. The last installment, focused on Zyrick (Kelvin Harrison Jr.), a young athlete, who joins a local movement against police brutality upon seeing the footage from the shooting, is an extended version of Reinaldo Marcus Green's previous short film. While *STOP* (2015) tells a story of a random stop and search of a Black teenager, *Monsters and Men*'s Zyrick has a similar experience, which leads to his radicalization.

The final example differs from others due to its genre – *Blindspotting* (2018) is a dark comedy that infuses a tragic plot with humor. The film was written over the span of several years by Daveed Diggs and Rafael Casal, who based the script on their own experiences of growing up in the Bay Area. It tells the story of Collin's (Daveed Diggs) last days of probation, during which he lives in a halfway home and works for a moving company. One night, while waiting at a red light, he witnesses the killing of a Black man by a police officer. This event affects him and his relationships with people close to him, including his lifelong friendship with Myles (Rafael Casal). The film also features a side plot about gentrification in Oakland.

The relation between these films and various stages of BLM protests is one of circularity. When the movement first started, it inspired filmmakers and scriptwriters to develop stories based on the real instances of police brutality or on their own individual experiences with institutional racism. Due to the length of the production and distribution process, their films premiered after the first wave of demonstrations died down but just in time to support renewed protests in recent years. In June 2020, to show their support for BLM, many distributors made their films on fighting racism available online for free; *The Hate U Give*, *Monsters and Men,* and *Blindspotting* were among them. As such, the loop is complete – films inspired by early phases of BLM protests were used to support a new wave of this movement. It is a safe assumption that recent events will follow a similar path.

The above brief overview of film narratives suggests that there seems to be an emerging model of how trauma of witnessing police brutality may be portrayed in contemporary cinema. As previously stated in the introduction, the similarities lie in the role of the witness and in modes of cinematic portrayal of psychosomatic symptoms of trauma. Having lived through traumatic events, the protagonists of the three films experience nightmares, panic attacks, and hallucinations linked to the original incident. The symptoms are skillfully visualized in the films to create a deeper understanding of the characters' psychological condition and evoke an emotional, empathetic reaction in the viewer. The narratives of the analyzed films focus not only on the traumatic events' impact on the witnesses themselves but also on their community – family, friends, neighbors. Moreover, there are similarities in how these films portray trauma's impact on the youth.

4. Witnessing Trauma

The central point in the analyzed narratives is the act of witnessing violence which affects the protagonists of all three films. There is a stark contrast between their regular lives – going to school, looking for work, spending time with friends – and the lives they lead after witnessing extreme cases of violence that result in someone's death. The traumatic event is the incident that separates the two stages of their lives and challenges their sense of security. In the aftermath of the killings, the protagonists face a difficult choice: they must decide if they should speak up for those who can no longer speak for themselves or to remain silent for their own safety. Despite their early age, they are acutely aware of mechanisms at play in this type of situation. Police officers who committed these acts are a part of the system with a history of protecting the perpetrators who could typically count on sympathy from the media and the public as well. Their victims had little to no such support. Back in 2001, Ron Eyerman noted that "mass-mediated experience always involves selective construction and representation, since what is seen is the result of the actions and decisions of professionals as to what is significant and how it should be presented" (Eyerman 2001, 3). In the 20 years that passed since Eyerman had written these words, the media landscape has evolved to allow for a more egalitarian use and the nature of witnessing violence changed along with it. With the rise of social media and modern technologies, it is more likely for their users to diminish the narratives presented by the traditional media and share their own perspective of certain events. Allissa V. Richardson writes:

> For the poor man of color, the cellphone is the closest visual production tool that he can muster to protect himself from news narratives that may try to frame his untimely demise incorrectly. I argue that when a poor man of color sees another member of his community being harassed by the police, he may be thinking that the next martyr may be him, and that he would want someone to document his story truthfully. (Richardson 2016, 10)

Richardson's assessment proves correct, and it was unconsciously echoed during the recent Derek Chauvin trial. A teenage eyewitness of George Floyd's murder, Darnella, testified: "When I look at George Floyd, I look at my dad, I look at my brother, my cousins, my uncles – because they are all black. (…) And I look at how that could have been one of them." (BBC 2021a).

In the films, the protagonists feel a similar responsibility for other Black people, regardless of whether they know them personally. Both Manny's and Starr's first instinct is to start recording the altercation between a Black person and the law enforcement. Only the former completes the recording, while the girl stops when she is ordered to by a white police officer. It is in *The Hate U Give* where the terrifying thought of seeing your loved ones' death comes to fruition. Starr witnesses the murder of her childhood friend twice: first, when she is ten, she sees her friend Natasha killed in a drive-by gang shooting; then, at sixteen she witnesses Khalil's death. Starr is the only member of her

childhood friend group who will live to see adulthood, which leaves her stunned and deeply traumatized. When she is asked to testify in front of the grand jury, she hesitates, being discouraged by her mother and intimidated by a local gang. Ultimately, she realizes that there is no one else to represent Khalil, and takes a stand, explaining that she wants to be a better friend for him than she was for Natasha. Even though she remains anonymous and is known only as "the witness," some of her white peers recognize her and ostracize her for it. Despite those setbacks, Starr begins to understand the value of giving testimony and documenting injustice. When she sees another instance of excessive use of force by police officers, as they try to unjustly apprehend her father during a family outing, she pulls out her phone and starts recording, citing her right to do so and she is joined by other patrons of the restaurant who also start recording. When Starr speaks during a protest in the final part of the film, she highlights the importance of giving testimony – she begins her speech by saying: "I am the witness. But so are y'all."

Monsters and Men reminds the viewers that the reality is rarely as simple. Manny also faces pressure after he is identified as the person who filmed the fatal shooting and posted it online. Unlike Starr, he is not being intimidated by a gang but by the local police force. He pays a high price for his testimony – he is arrested on fabricated charges and held in custody, away from his young daughter and pregnant wife. The possibility of a reform is dismissed when Dennis refuses to incriminate his colleague accused of the killing, and later chooses to look elsewhere when he witnesses a case of racially motivated "random" stop and search. *Monsters and Men* reiterates the previously mentioned argument – witness testimonies are crucial to enforce accountability and usher change within the system.

On the other hand, *Blindspotting* shows why some may be wary of the judiciary system and afraid of coming forward as witnesses. For Collin, as a convicted felon, remaining silent about what he had witnessed seems like the only viable and safe option. His silence is a detrimental factor for his relationship with his community and features heavily throughout the film, with voicelessness presented as a sign of experienced trauma.

Some of the protagonists get the opportunity to challenge the official story, because – as Richardson noticed – the latest technologies give people of color better access to media production tools. They help them take control of the narrative surrounding them, so they do not have to rely solely on the traditional media, which are a part of the same system that actively acts against them[2]. Marcia Mundt, Karen Ross, and Charla

---

[2] The use of third-party social media platforms and new technologies comes with its hazards. William Lafi Youmans and Jillian C. York observed that social media may be used by all parties involved in a certain conflict, where "social media tools that facilitate protest can also be used by repressive regimes and their supporters to dampen and disrupt opposition" (Youmans and York 2012, 323). The "privatized goals of platform owners and developers" (Youmans and York 2012, 316) should also be taken into consideration, as they may differ from the goals of the platforms' users. Moreover, Jessie Daniels pointed out that the notion of the Internet as a color-

M Burnett note the significance of social media in this process, as it "enables movements not only to create a shared narrative, but to easily and quickly disseminate that narrative as a contrast to existing, mainstream discourse" (Mundt, Ross and Burnett 2018, 10).

More recently, Richardson shared her thoughts on how police shooting videos are circulated in the media, calling on the public not to watch them "casually" and instead to treat them with the respect and care they deserve, to avoid exploitation. She writes: "Perhaps even more traumatizing is the ease with which some of these deaths can be viewed online. (…) Instead, cellphone videos of vigilante violence and fatal police encounters should be viewed like lynching photographs – with solemn reserve and careful circulation." (Richardson 2020).

There is a clear need to document traumatic events we witness, so they are not lost to time. But the goal of sharing and archiving the footage for future generations can be lost in modern exploitative viral sensationalism. As previously mentioned, indirect, vicarious exposure to racist incidents can also be a source of racial trauma. Circulation of graphic images in the media may become a trauma-triggering factor for some viewers. Filmmakers must be aware that their films may induce a similar response. So far, the analyzed examples have mostly avoided an exploitative gaze of showing hurt Black body images. Instead, they focus on the emotional toll behind each instance of police killing, inviting the audiences to reflect on it as well. It aligns with Kaplan and Wang's suggestion about the positions viewers can take in relation to trauma films. The one they find the most promising, and the one which can be found in the analyzed works, is the position of the witness, which:

> may open up a space for transformation of the viewer through empathic identification without vicarious traumatization — an identification which allows the spectator to enter into the victim's experience through a work's narration. It is the unusual, anti-narrative process of the narration that is itself transformative in inviting the viewer to at once be there emotionally (and often powerfully moved), but also to keep a cognitive distance and awareness denied to the victim by the traumatic process. (Kaplan and Wang 2004, 10)

Cinema has the ability to simultaneously evoke emotional response and critical recognition in the viewers, potentially altering their stance on certain topics. For that precise reason, it can and should be used to address the issues at the heart of the American antiracist movement.

---

blind technology is a "pervasive fantasy" (Daniels 2015, 1381) and "a raceless utopia that exists alongside the realities of racial inequality in the tech industry" (Daniels 2015, 1389), which is rarely addressed by scholars and in popular writing.

5. Visualizing Trauma

Films about police brutality attempt to visualize individual experiences of trauma. According to Caruth, due to the sudden nature of the traumatic experience, the original event is "not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" and because of its "very unassimilated nature — the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – [it] returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth 1996, 4). Kaplan and Wang offer the following summary of ways in which the traumatic event may return: "the memory tries to find a way into consciousness, but ends up only leaking its disturbing and ambivalent traces in the typical traumatic symptoms of flashbacks, hallucinations, phobias, and nightmares" (Kaplan and Wang 2004, 5).

Throughout the years, cinema developed multiple methods of depicting psychosomatic responses to violence. Cinematic techniques used to visualize symptoms of trauma include close-ups, flashbacks, and nightmare sequences, which are employed to relay various aspects of protagonists' experiences. Physical reactions, such as panic attacks, hyperventilation, or shivers, are often depicted in extreme close-ups. They add to the claustrophobic feel of such scenes and may evoke a sense of identification in the viewer as well. Psychological turmoil is represented through cinematic means which allow an audience to enter the protagonists' perspectives – flashbacks explore their memories, while nightmare sequences show a less structured, unconscious emotional response to traumatic events that are outside of the protagonists' control.

All three methods appear in the analyzed films. They feature briefly in *Monsters and Men* when Manny recalls the killing he witnessed on the next day. In an analogous situation in *The Hate U Give*, Starr experiences physical sickness after a nightmare, as well as panic attacks throughout the film. Viewers get to see her memories of the two murders she witnessed. They become less vivid with time – their fading is signalized by using a sepia filter – but still affect her. When Starr is hit by a wave of flashbacks as she stands over Khalil's coffin, she almost faints.

Surprisingly, the most comprehensive example of visualizing trauma symptoms appears in the film that assumes the lightest tone – *Blindspotting*. Collin experiences hallucinations while awake multiple times: on a morning run and near the scene of the murder. When he runs past a cemetery, he believes he sees dead Black people, standing next to the gravestones. The victim of the recent shooting is among them, looking Collin in the eye, bleeding from the wounds he suffered and reminding him of his perceived guilt.

Alongside the hallucinations, the protagonist suffers from a symbolic nightmare. The sequence ties together different experiences from Collin's life: his time in prison, witnessing the shooting, doubts regarding his friendship with Myles and the guilt of not coming forward as a witness. The nightmare takes place in a courtroom, where Collin sits in the place of the defendant, still in his prison uniform, while Myles speaks for (and instead of) him. The jury consists of twelve Black men in hoodies – similar

to how the victim of the recent shooting was dressed – and chained together. The judge remains faceless but is eventually revealed to be the police officer responsible for the shooting. The scene is lit by a pulsing light: at first only red (reminiscent of the traffic lights at the scene of the murder), which is then joined by blue and turns into a police siren. Collin is mute in the dream – bullets come out of his mouth instead of words, symbolizing the violence of remaining silent and his belief in his own co-culpability. Bryant-Davis and Ocampo noted that "survivors of racist incidents who utilize their resources to aid those still struggling with the institutional impact of racist incidents can replace guilt with responsible activism" (Bryant-Davis and Ocampo 2005, 495). Collin does not have access to the necessary resources, in part due to his status of being a convicted felon. He is haunted by guilt and unable to heal. The dream ends abruptly when the "judge" starts violently smashing his hammer and Collin finally regains his voice, repeatedly yelling "stop." When the protagonist wakes up, he is visibly shaken. Even though the nightmare sequence is complex, it is still understandable to the average viewer if they are aware of power dynamics within American judiciary and the history of police violence in the country.

Filmmakers use techniques that help them imitate the experiences of trauma survivors. Some of them aim to evoke a sense of identification in the viewers, which further aligns with Kaplan and Wang's "witness position." The films depict individual reactions to witnessing violent events that are a part of the wider phenomenon of racial trauma. Due to its historical, institutional, and collective aspects, it is not easily curable. Even though individual films try to offer consolation to the viewer by adding a "happy ending", most visibly in *The Hate U Give*, with its hopeful final note of community rebuilding and family healing, they cannot solve the problems at their core.

6. *The Hate U Give Little Infants*

The final common thread in narratives about police brutality against Black Americans is the impact such events have on youth. The protagonists of all three films are young but there are characters younger than them – a new generation, exposed to violence on a daily basis. Children of color who appear in the films are all victims of their circumstances, despite their parents' best efforts to protect them from harm. As Maryam M Jernigan and Jessica Henderson Daniel (2011) note, "children and adolescents of color are not excluded from the experiences of racial discrimination."(123) The authors ask rhetorically: "If an adult as powerful as the President of the United States consistently encounters individual and systemic racism, how do Black children or adolescents begin to deal with this lifelong phenomenon in their own lives?" (123).

Parents try to give their children a safe life and prepare them to appropriately deal with potentially dangerous everyday situations. *The Hate U Give* opens with "the talk" about living "while Black." Starr's father teaches his kids how to interact with law enforcement and has them learn Black Panthers' Ten Point Program by heart. After a vio-

lent run-in with the police, he asks them to recite point seven: "We want an immediate end to police brutality and murder of Black people, by any means necessary." When Starr's father concludes the initial lesson with the words "know your rights, know your worth," he unknowingly echoes the assessment made by a group of scholars researching race socialization:

> For some parents, race is one of the central concerns in raising their children. They believe they are not simply raising an American, but a black or African American, whose situation and experiences are distinct from that of other Americans. Similarly, parents who anticipate that their children will encounter a hostile social environment teach them to be comfortable with their blackness. (Thornton et al. 1990, 402)

When a time of crisis comes, the children imitate what they have seen in their closest environment – even when it is against their parents' lessons. Starr's younger brother reaches for a gun, wanting to protect his family and terrifying them in the process. The finale glosses over the possible repercussions for the boy's mental health. As Jernigan and Daniel further note:

> In addition to the direct experience of racial trauma, when persons bear witness to acts of racism, it can create a secondary experience of trauma. For children who witness racism, the impact can be equally distressing. Inherent in the conceptualization of racial trauma is the deliberate targeting of persons of color because of their racial background. Consequently, when Black youths observe peers' experiences of racism, they may begin to wonder if they will be targeted next. (Jernigan and Daniel 2011, 131)

Blindspotting features a remarkably similar side plot: Myles' girlfriend first reads a pamphlet about teaching children how to interact with police officers and then tries it on her son. Later, when Collin raises his voice and points his finger at the boy, he puts his hands up and yells "don't shoot". The child's mother was prompted to teach him that behavior after a moment of terror when she found her child playing with a real weapon, belonging to his father.

The parents are moved to introduce precautionary measures because they are aware of how their children are perceived by the public. While addressing how Black boys are presented in the media, Debbie Olson notes that "the persistence of the discourse of the criminal black youth in the public consciousness directly impacts social relations between black youth and the rest of society" (Olson 2017, 122). It reflects in the ways parents of color socialize their children – the education is based on the parents' knowledge of power relations in American society. They know the names of Tamir Rice and Trayvon Martin – young Black boys, who did not get to live long enough to become adults. No parent wants to see their children's names on the news or hear them chanted in the streets in a call for justice. They transfer their own traumas to the children, continuing an established pattern of conscious and subconscious transmission

of collective trauma among the members of historically oppressed groups. When the parents warn their children about potential everyday dangers of "living while Black", they do so in good faith, to provide them with a sense of safety, but at the same time, they introduce the notions of racial trauma to another generation.

7. Conclusions

Films depicting the trauma of witnessing police violence against people of color can serve multiple purposes. At the most basic level, they can be used to educate those who never had and never will have similar experiences. In the words of Marinella Rodi-Risberg, "while 'we' cannot understand that which 'we' have not experienced, art can offer sensitive readers a unique view of other people's suffering" (Rodi-Risberg 2018, 114). These narratives can also offer consolation to those who suffer from similar traumas because they often include a possibility of healing. Sensitivity is crucial to avoid exploitation, particularly when portraying a delicate and hurtful matter, such as racially motivated violence. Filmmakers behind *The Hate U Give*, *Monsters and Men,* and *Blindspotting* focus on the ways in which individuals and communities are affected by such incidents. They highlight the importance of witness testimony and portray parents' worries about their children's future within a prejudiced system. In addition, all three films represent the psychosomatic symptoms of trauma through similar cinematic techniques.

The ways in which the filmmakers build trauma-centered narratives and the issues they choose to explore in more detail align with theories developed in trauma studies. Film proves to be a suitable medium for depicting both individual and racial trauma connected with witnessing police brutality and should be studied as such. That is also why trauma theory is an appropriate theoretical framework in its analysis. What started as a response to a current crisis from the early 2010s has developed into a wider phenomenon. The Black Lives Matter movement shows no signs of giving up the fight, and as long as there are instances of racially motivated violence, there will be a need to document and portray it in film. It is safe to assume that films following a similar structure will continue to appear and will remain a vital part of the debate about dismantling racist systems for years to come.

References

BBC News. 2021a. *George Floyd: Teenage witness 'stays up apologising for not doing more.'* Accessed April 26, 2021. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56585165.
BBC News. 2021b. *Why the Chauvin trial 'exhausts' black America*. Prod. Larry Madowo, Koralie Barrau, Ian Cartwright. Accessed April 26, 2021. Video. https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-56644465.

Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Daniels, Jessie. 2015. "'My Brain Database Doesn't See Skin Color': Color-Blind Racism in the Technology Industry and in Theorizing the Web." *American Behavioral Scientist* 59 (11): 1377 –1393. doi: 10.1177/0002764215578728.

Eyerman, Ron. 2003. *Cultural Trauma. Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

First, Jennifer M. et al. 2020. "Posttraumatic Stress Related to the Killing of Michael Brown and Resulting Civil Unrest in Ferguson, Missouri: Roles of Protest Engagement, Media Use, Race, and Resilience." *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research* 11 (3): 369–391. doi: 10.1086/711162.

Gathara, Patrick. 2018. "'Black Panther' Offers a Regressive, Neocolonial Vision of Africa." *The Washington Post*. Accessed May 9, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/02/26/black-panther-offers-a-regressive-neocolonial-vision-of-africa/

Helms, Janet E., Nicolas, Guerda, Green, Carlton E. 2010. "Racism and Ethnoviolence as Trauma: Enhancing Professional Training." *Traumatology* 16 (4): 53–62. doi: 10.1177/15347 65610389595.

Jernigan, Maryam M., Daniel, Jessica Henderson. 2011. "Racial Trauma in the Lives of Black Children and Adolescents: Challenges and Clinical Implications." *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma* 4: 123–141. doi: 10.1080/19361521.2011.574678.

Kaplan, E. Ann, Wang, Ban. 2004. "Introduction From Traumatic Paralysis to the Force Field of Modernity." In *Trauma and Cinema,* ed. E. Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang, 1–22. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Lebron, Christopher. 2018. "'Black Panther' Is Not the Movie We Deserve." *Boston Review*. Accessed May 9, 2021. https://bostonreview.net/race/christopher-lebron-black-panther.

Mundt, Marcia, Ross, Karen, Burnett Charla M. 2018. "Scaling Social Movements Through Social Media: The Case of Black Lives Matter." *Social Media + Society* 4 (4). doi: 10.1177/2056305118807911.

Nolan, Emma. 2020. "'13th' Netflix Documentary Viewers Surge by 4,665 Percent in Three Weeks." *Newsweek*. Accessed July 24, 2021. https://www.newsweek.com/13th-netflix-youtube-documentary-watch-ava-duvernay-race-movies-1511535.

Olson, Debbie. 2017. *Black Children in Hollywood Cinema. Cast in Shadow*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Richardson, Allissa V. 2016. "Bearing Witness While Black." *Digital Journalism* 5 (6): 673–698. doi: 10.1080/21670811.2016.1193818.

Richardson, Allissa V. 2020a. "The Coming Archival Crisis: How Ephemeral Video Disappears Protest Journalism and Threatens Newsreels of Tomorrow." *Digital Journalism* 8 (10): 1338–1346. doi: 10.1080/21670811.2020.1841568.

Richardson, Allissa V. 2020. "Why Cellphone Videos of Black People's Deaths Should Be Considered Sacred, Like Lynching Photographs." *The Conversation*. Accessed April 26, 2021. https://theconversation.com/why-cellphone-videos-of-black-peoples-deaths-should-be-considered-sacred-like-lynching-photographs-139252.

Rodi-Risberg, Marinella. 2018. "Problems in Representing Trauma." In *Trauma and Literature*, ed. J. Roger Kurtz, 110–123. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Scurfield, Raymond Monsour, Mackey, David W. 2001. "Racism, Trauma and Positive Aspects of Exposure to Race-Related Experiences." *Journal of Ethnic And Cultural Diversity in Social Work* 10 (1): 23–47. doi: 10.1300/J051v10n01_02.

Smith, Jamil. 2018. "The Revolutionary Power Of Black Panther." *Time.* Accessed May 9, 2021. https://time.com/black-panther/.

Thornton, Michael C. et al. 1990. "Sociodemographic and Environmental Correlates of Racial Socialization by Black Parents." *Child Development* 61 (2): 401–409. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1131101.

Youmans, William Lafi, York, Jillian C. 2012. "Social Media and the Activist Toolkit: User Agreements, Corporate Interests, and the Information Infrastructure of Modern Social Movements." *Journal of Communication* 62 (2): 315-329. doi: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01636.x.

Films

Blindspotting. 2018. Directed by Carlos López Estrada. Summit Entertainment, Codeblack Films, Snoot Entertainment. Film.

Monsters and Men. 2018. Directed by Reinaldo Marcus Green. The Department of Motion Pictures, Sight Unseen Pictures, AgX. Film.

The Hate U Give. 2018. Directed by George Tillman Jr. Fox 2000 Pictures, Temple Hill Entertainment, State Street Pictures. Film.