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# Do the Loud Thing: The Boombox and Urban Space in 1980s American Cinema

**ABSTRACT**
Amid New York City's implementation of urban renewal programs, boomboxes faced considerable public backlash that made boombox users, predominantly young men of color, targets of the city's gentrifying priorities. This article explores how US narrative films released between 1979 and 1989 expressed the boombox's contentious meanings and uses. During a period of decline in Black representation in American filmmaking, the boombox served as a metonym, amplifying struggles at the intersection of race, space, and economics. American films in the 1980s employed the boombox as a narrative and representational device to echo, comment on, and reimagine subcultures' and gentrifiers' claims over urban space.

In the film *Krush Groove* (Michael Schultz, 1985), a hip-hop musical presenting a fictionalized account of the beginning of Def Jam Recordings, rap group the Fat Boys (Mark Morales, Damon Wimbley, Darren "Buffy" Robinson) get kicked out of their biology class at a New York City public high school after disrupting their teacher's lecture. The group transforms this ousting into an opportunity by placing a boombox—a large, battery-powered portable stereo—atop a windowsill in a stairway. Its sounds draw their classmates to their improvisatory performance of "Don't You Dog Me," motivating a racially diverse crowd of fellow students to clap and breakdance along. Defying the directives of an authority figure, the Fat Boys use the boombox to transform the tightly controlled hallways and classrooms of a public school into a celebratory space for youth expression through music and dance (see Figure 1).

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Figure 1. The Fat Boys' boombox helps transform a high school stairway in *Krush Groove* (Warner Bros., 1985).


Figure 2. Joe Clark (Morgan Freeman) amplifies his voice to speak over a boombox in a high school cafeteria in *Lean on Me* (Warner Bros., 1989).

Four years later, another film presented a different perspective on the place of the boombox within an urban public high school populated by students of color. In the Paterson, New Jersey–set *Lean on Me* (John G. Avildsen, 1989), draconian principal Joe Clark (Morgan Freeman) roams students' tables during lunch period, employing a megaphone to amplify his voice over the boomboxes that bounce "After 12" by Force MDs across the cafeteria's walls (see Figure 2). Seeing a student (Jermaine Hopkins) stealing food from another student's plate, Clark orders "all radios off" so that he

can use the visibly humiliated Black youth for a teachable moment on "self-respect." Ordering the student and his schoolmates to sing the school song to a cafeteria instructed to observe "absolute silence," the principal replaces the boombox's sounds of youth music with both the official music of the institution and his amplified voice of authority. This scene exemplifies how the film "enact[s] white fantasies" that were part of conservatives' elevation of this real-life African American authority figure, in what George Lipsitz has termed "a campaign of counterinsurgency against unruly inner-city minority youths"—specifically, the fantasy that the problems faced by "inner-city" schools are rooted in the character of its occupants rather than an inequity of resources.[1] The divergent uses of the boombox in these films' depictions of urban public schools illustrate both the potentialities and stakes of the device: *Krush Groove* stages a utopic vision of youthful freedom via the boombox's potential to transform public space, while *Lean on Me* demonstrates how official control of the sounds—and thus, the aforementioned potentialities—of the boombox can be a means for conscripting young Black bodies into compliance.

As these two examples indicate, the presence of the boombox in American cities inspired various cinematic responses to the device. Throughout the 1980s, the boombox's employment in American films participated in the contentious meanings and responses circulating around it, amplifying reactionary racial and cultural politics in some films while imagining new possibilities for social organization and spatial power among marginalized populations in others. More than simply reflecting dominant discourses about the device, the boombox in 1980s American cinema came to serve as a metonym for the claims that participants in hip-hop subculture sought to make over urban public space in response to the forces of gentrification and its manifestations in the forms of economic disparity, divestment of public resources, noise control ordinances, and aggressive policing. The cinematic persistence of this device is particularly meaningful for films set in New York City, where the boombox was a subject of pronounced contention across newspaper columns, municipal legislation, and police precincts. During the 1980s, the city continued its decade-plus practice of simultaneously facilitating motion picture location shoots in its public spaces and hastening its gentrifying projects, including financializing the city's economy and implementing "quality of life" policies. Such were the same structural conditions from which Bronx-based hip-hop emerged—a subculture built by Black and Latino/a youths, neglected by their city's priorities, for whom the boombox became a staple. During a decade of diminished opportunities for and representation of Black people in American filmmaking, the boombox became a "noisy" signifier of the struggles over spatial power within the gentrifying American city. By combining intersecting scholarship across sound studies, urban studies, cultural studies, and Afri-

1 George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, rev. and exp. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 143–145.

can American cinema studies, I seek to demonstrate how cinematic depictions of consumer objects such as the boombox can take on distinct modes of representation onscreen that both draw from their extracinematic discourses and imagine new possibilities for use.

In moving image studies, consumer media technologies have been most widely investigated in terms of how they shape production methods, exhibition, and spectatorship.[2] Yet the repeated employment of such devices within film narratives has received relatively little scholarly attention. Since the conglomeration of film studios into corporate media empires, consumer media technologies are regularly featured onscreen. These industrial developments led to overt instances of product placement and presented storytelling challenges for creative workers seeking to realistically integrate changing technological norms.[3] However, depictions of consumer technologies in films have implications beyond revealing the economic ties of film studios to consumer product lines or complicating the mechanics of storytelling and characterization: they represent, reinforce, and reimagine relations of power between everyday users and the forces of culture, capital, and law. As demonstrated in cultural studies and popular music studies scholarship, portable music technologies in particular afford opportunities for users to participate in complex practices of strategic engagement with, and self-expression through, popular culture in various geographic, political, and economic contexts.[4]

Building from this tradition, several academic studies have explored how film narratives distill the social conflicts surrounding sound reproduction and playback technologies, but such studies have often been executed toward better understanding the object's social meanings, not its cinematic uses.[5] By analyzing patterns across various categories of American narrative

2 Studies of (specifically) mobile consumer media technologies in relation to moving image media include Dan Hassoun, "Engaging Distractions: Regulating Second-Screen Use in the Theater," *Cinema Journal* 55, no. 2 (Winter 2016): 89–111, https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2016.0013; André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, *The End of Cinema? A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age*, trans. Timothy Barnard (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); and Marsha Berry and Max Schleser, eds., *Mobile Media Making in the Age of Smartphones* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

3 Paul Grainge writes, "As a form of commercial spectacle, the visibility of product placement since the 1980s has responded to the formalization of relations between the film business and global consumer industries." See Paul Grainge, *Brand Hollywood: Selling Entertainment in a Global Media Age* (London: Routledge, 2007), 35. Screenwriter John August describes how smartphones create new storytelling obstacles for filmmakers in "Screenwriters Hate Cell Phones," *John August* (blog), October 11, 2013, https://johnaugust.com/2013/screenwriters-hate-cell-phones.

4 The endurance of the Walkman as a case study for the questions and theories that drive cultural studies is evident in Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Anders Koed Madsen, Hugh Mackay, and Keith Negus's *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE, 2013). See also Michael Bull, *Sounding Out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life* (New York: Berg, 2000); Michael Bull, *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience* (London: Routledge, 2008); and, more recently, Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow, *Personal Stereo* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

5 See Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 106–144; Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 1, 141–142; Jennifer Stoever-Ackerman, "Reproducing U.S. Citizenship in *Blackboard Jungle*: Race, Cold War Liberalism, and the Tape Recorder," in *Sound Clash: Listening to American Studies*, ed. Kara Keeling and Josh Kun (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 337–362; Joseph Schloss and Bill Bahng Boyer, "Urban Echoes: The

feature filmmaking of the 1980s, I seek to demonstrate how the boombox has operated as a narrative and representational device. Drawing upon extracinematic discourses, many films echoed and augmented competing perspectives of the device articulated by users, critics, and the law. But, just as importantly, several films imagined new possibilities that could be derived via strategic use, positioning the boombox as an instrument for uniting subcultures and reimagining spatial ownership. Cinematic representations of consumer technologies not only provide an audiovisual illustration of these objects' dominant meanings and uses but also materialize visions of potential, unrealized interactions with such objects—fantasies of use that made such technologies meaningful, powerful, or threatening in the public mind.

In the case of the boombox, the device was frequently (although not exclusively) situated onscreen in urban public contexts that constitute the focus of this study: within city streets and sidewalks, on public transportation, at clubs, and in public schools, with its sounds echoing across and between via soundscapes and radio waves that connect these spaces.[6] The boombox's presence in such spaces amplifies conflict between hegemonic and grassroots control over a changing urban landscape, and films' particular employments of this device position them within competing perspectives of the gentrifying city. While not intended as an encyclopedic account, the following pages demonstrate how the material relations between sound, body, and space that made boombox use meaningful have been expressed across a diverse array of films, from independent to studio efforts, from genre works to portraits of city life ripped from headlines. Despite their varied production contexts, these films share notions about the device's meaningful audiovisual presence as part of the city's iconicity even as they diverge in their investments over the contested spatial claims that boombox users made. Motion pictures render visual the enunciations through space and movement that make the boombox consequential as a sonic tool, and city films that featured the boombox were often shot on the same streets in which struggles over them took place.

The boombox emerged on American screens during a period of crisis in African American cinema. In writing about the 1980s, scholars of African American cinema have characterized the decade as presenting limited and regressive opportunities for filmmakers and performers compared to what Ed Guerrero calls the "Black movie boom" of the early 1970s.[7] Com-

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Boombox and Sonic Mobility in the 1980s," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mobile Music Studies, Volume 1*, ed. Sumanth Gopinath and Jason Stanyek (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 399–413; Michelle Langford, "Iranian Cinema and Social Media," in *Social Media in Iran: Politics and Society after 2009*, ed. David M. Faris and Babak Rahimi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 251–270; and Tim McNelis and Elena Boschi, "Seen and Heard: Visible Playback Technology in Film," in *Ubiquitous Musics: The Everyday Sounds That We Don't Always Notice*, ed. Marta García Quiñones, Anahid Kassabian, and Elena Boschi (New York: Routledge, 2016), 89–106.

6 Outside the focus of this article, onscreen uses of the boombox extended to suburban-set films dominated by white characters in which the device fostered rebellious transgressions of social and physical boundaries, albeit with substantially less risk for users. Examples include the 1984 films *Making the Grade* (Dorian Walker), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven), and the Cameron Crowe–scripted *The Wild Life* (Art Linson). Crowe famously revisited the boombox in *Say Anything . . .* (1989).

7 Ed Guerrero, "The Black Image in Protective Custody: Hollywood's Biracial Buddy

mercial films of the 1980s echoed the political norms of the Reagan Era by "engag[ing] white America's deep social fears and yearnings."[8] Keith Corson describes this period thusly: "Features with African American themes—to say nothing of features actually made by black directors—were few and far between . . . creating a steep decline in black representation and opportunities."[9] Within this context, and built upon the identification of African American film with "city film in the public imagination," the boombox often functioned in 1980s American cinema as a metonym that dramatized conflict over rights to urban space during a period of gentrification.[10] In New York City specifically, the boombox traveled onto American screens as the space of the city continued to be used for commercial film production, a practice that had, since 1966, been part of mayoral efforts to revitalize the city amid social and economic crises.[11] The boombox's onscreen presence emerged from the same socioeconomic conditions that made it a prominent piece of merchandise in the gentrifying American city.

The boombox is part of a history of everyday technologies that have themselves become sites of contention within larger struggles for liberation, justice, and power. Much like media representations, media devices from radios to smartphones can be instruments for oppressive hegemonic control as well as tools for challenging, illuminating, or working around official power. Over the past decade, the presence of the cell phone in the hands of African Americans has been employed by users as hardware for witnessing state violence and by police as a pretext for enacting such violence.[12] As Armond R. Towns argues, Marshall McLuhan's declaration of media as "extensions of man" has distinct effects for the colonized Black body, itself an "extension" or "invention" of Western man.[13] Key to resisting such reification of the Black body, Towns continues, is to push past "white racial imaginations" with "Black people's (but of course not only Black people's) creativity, toward the production of the new forms of humanness that lie at the crux of colonial projects that instrumentalized people and things."[14] For Towns, this goal requires media scholarship that moves "the study of blackness and media" beyond "the question of media content" and, instead, "asks

Films of the Eighties," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 237.

8 Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 113. Regarding this period, Mark A. Reid states, "Just as the Reagan administration abandoned the inner-city, major film studios overlooked the desires of black inner-city youths." Mark A. Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 91.

9 Keith Corson, *Trying to Get Over: African American Directors after Blaxploitation, 1977–1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 2.

10 Paula J. Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 1.

11 For a history of such efforts, see Noelle Griffis, "Filmmaking to Save the City in Crisis: New York on Location, 1966–1975" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2018).

12 For example, Stephon Clark (in 2018) and Andre Hill (in 2020) were shot and killed by police who regarded the presence of cell phones in their hands as a threat. See also Allissa V. Richardson, *Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones, and the New Protest #Journalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

13 Armond R. Towns, "Toward a Black Media Philosophy," *Cultural Studies* 34, no. 6 (2020): 852–854, 869, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2020.1792524.

14 Towns, 870.

less what does the Black body *mean* and more what does the Black body *do*?"[15] Exploring the implications of what such a perspective means for the study of cinema, this article looks back at the boombox to investigate how functions and meanings become articulated in moving image depictions of the relationships between technology and identity. As a device racialized through discourse, law, and subcultural formations, the boombox's onscreen legacy demonstrates how technologies can become a construct that reifies marginalized people toward the maintenance of white hegemonic power as well as a tactical social and narrative tool for imagining new configurations of people and power. Extending questions of media representation to analyses of the uses of everyday media technologies within media narratives can illuminate the complex connections between the material operations, cultural significations, and social uses of such devices—in other words, how function can reinforce or remake meaning and vice versa. To that end, this article contextualizes the boombox's cultural and legal status as part of an analysis of eight films that make meaning of playing and controlling the device within the space of the city.

## HOW THE BOOMBOX MAKES NOISE, FROM STREETS TO SCREENS

Throughout the 1980s, numerous American films portrayed the boombox through the lens of its objectors, depicting its users as ranging from nuisances to deviant threats while presenting anyone who seeks to silence users as justified in their conduct. At the same time, several films represented the boombox from the ostensible perspective of its users: as a device for public socialization over dance and music-making, a means for transcending physical and social spaces, and a conspicuous tool for communicating cultural-political statements. Such interpretations are not mutually exclusive. Importantly, boombox users, as well as participants in the youth music subcultures associated with the device, sought to reclaim the perceived threat of their bodies in urban space. Employing the device's signature capacity to project bass-heavy music at a loud volume, boombox users perform a type of "spatial entitlement," or what Gaye Theresa Johnson terms "a way in which marginalized communities have created new collectives based not just upon eviction and exclusion from physical spaces, but also on new and imagined uses of technology, creativity, and spaces."[16] In reflecting on the history of the song "Fight the Power," which operates as a leitmotif via the boombox in *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989), Public Enemy rapper Chuck D described the politics of Black physical presence in aural terms, stating, "my skin has been seen as more hostile than anything I could say. Black people, our skin is noisy."[17] This "noisiness" is not only key to understanding hip-hop subculture and the historical context of its emergence but echoes a substantial history of the sonic politics surrounding marginalized populations' uses of consumer

15 Towns, 869 (emphasis in the original).

16 Gaye Theresa Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), x.

17 Ben Beaumont-Thomas, "How We Made Public Enemy's 'Fight the Power,'" *The Guardian*, March 7, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/mar/07/how-we-made-public-enemy-fight-the-power.

audio technologies in ways that challenge the racial implications of the "sound/noise" divide.[18]

Across recent work in sound studies, scholars have revisited *noise*—an unscientific metric generally categorized as unwanted sound—in order to investigate the social constructions that make sonic phenomena meaningful. Many such investigations draw from Jacques Attali's canonical work on noise as a framework for understanding how music is made legible through its capitalist reproduction and the conduits through which it is controlled or is otherwise cast off as "meaningless noise."[19] Studies of noise have also challenged presumptions associated with this sonic category inherited from R. Murray Schafer's acoustic ecology, which locates "silence" as a premodern ideal and considers "noise" to be the aural byproduct of twentieth-century alienation.[20] Conceptualizing sound and noise outside a colonial, white-dominant perspective, sound scholars have turned toward understanding how sound, alongside the regime of the visual, is constitutive of racial identity and social marginalization in ways that trouble the sound/noise binary. After all, "silence" has not provided everybody the sanctuary theorized by Schafer.[21] The work of Jennifer Lynn Stoever, for example, conceptualizes the "sonic color line" as "the process of racializing sound—how and why certain bodies are expected to produce, desire, and live amongst particular sounds," a phenomenon driven via the processes by which "dominant listening practices accrue—and change—over time."[22] By listening to noise, we can better understand how the contested meanings of sounds are wrapped up in regimes of power. Noise, understood in these terms, can be both a category weaponized to control unwanted expressions by marginalized populations and a disruptive claim to power by those same populations, challenging dominant listening practices.

In her foundational 1994 study of American hip-hop, Tricia Rose defines "black noise" as referring to "the polyvocal languages of rap," a means for encapsulating hip-hop's heterogeneous production of music and culture that expresses "black voices from the margins of urban America."[23] Hip-hop's relationship to space is essential to its decisive enunciation of noise. From tagging subways with graffiti signatures to breakdancing in city streets to building music by combining existing songs and sounds, hip-hop culture

18 Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 12.

19 Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 6–8.

20 R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1977), 3, 253–259. Responses include Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*; and Matthew Gandy and BJ Nilsen, eds., *The Acoustic City* (Berlin: Jovis, 2014).

21 Recent scholarship examines contemporary examples of African American silence that have been met with backlash and/or violence, including Colin Kaepernick's blacklisting by the National Football League and aggressive policing in public schools. See, respectively, Mack Hagood, *Hush: Media and Sonic Self-Control* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 199; and Stoever, *Sonic Color Line*, 3.

22 Stoever, *Sonic Color Line*, 7.

23 Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), xiv, 2.

"replicates and reimagines the experiences of urban life and symbolically appropriates urban space through sampling, attitude, dance, style, and sound effects."[24] Rap songs of the period of Rose's writing were rife with geographical references that demonstrate the sense of place central to hip-hop identity and history.[25] Such references emplaced hip-hop within the changing geography of New York City. The noise produced by early hip-hop subculture, throughout its manifestations, was a direct challenge to the dominant economic and geographic priorities of New York, where city government increasingly valued gentrification. The city's federal funding crisis in the mid-1970s led to a sharp decline in public services and public sector jobs, and successive mayors' strategies for recovery revolved principally around attracting private capital to the city, resulting in structural changes that exacerbated racial and economic inequality, particularly in the South Bronx.[26] Beyond the municipal neglect of populations, communities, and neighborhoods, such policies also led to "uneven development" in which combined projects of gentrification, urban renewal, and "quality of life" policing reinforced long-held notions of desirable urban patrons and residents.[27] These policies facilitated, in Laam Hae's words, "the decline of urban space in terms of being able to offer venues of spontaneous cultural expression, democracy and radical politics."[28] In her adoption of Henri Lefebvre's concept of the "right to the city," Hae explains how alternative cultural formations in New York City during this period that sought to "democratically create and appropriate spaces of use value" were met by "colonization by market rationality" and "the state's undue infringement upon them."[29]

Boombox use produced an insistent noise that mobilized grassroots cultural formations and interrupted the gentrification project, providing a means for dispossessed populations to (re)claim a right to the city. In addition to loudly projecting music, boomboxes served as technologies for hip-hop's defining social activities such as breakdancing and rap battles and became a signifier of hip-hop style.[30] Boombox use thus constituted a subcultural activity—a practice of resistance through ritual—in John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts's theorization of the term. Subcultures "*win space* for the young" realized by a presence in "cultural space in the neighbourhood and institutions, real time for leisure and recreation, actual room on the street or street-corner" via the work of "adopt[ing] and adapt[ing] material objects—goods and possessions" that are reorganized into "distinctive 'styles' which express the collectivity of their being-as-a-group." Rather than employing such strategies to overturn their subordinate class experience, subcultures offer a

24 Rose, 22.

25 See Murray Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), xvii–xviii.

26 Rose, *Black Noise*, 27–34.

27 Laam Hae, *The Gentrification of Nightlife and the Right to the City: Regulating Spaces of Social Dancing in New York* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 4–5.

28 Hae, 5.

29 Hae, 10, 6; Henri Lefebvre, "The Right to the City," in *Writings on Cities*, ed. and trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 147–159.

30 Lyle Owerko, *The Boombox Project: The Machines, the Music, and the Urban Underground* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2010), 25–26.

"resolution which, because pitched largely at the symbolic level, was fated to fail. . . . They 'solve,' but in an imaginary way, problems which at the concrete material level remain unresolved."[31] While representations of boombox use should not be confused with the noise produced by boombox subculture itself, films that convey the perspectives of boombox users both foreground the functions and meanings of their subcultural winning of space and articulate imaginary solutions for the problems to which they respond. Films produce a vivid audiovisual record among (to return to Attali) the numerous "images and material conflicts" amplified by the noise of the boombox.[32]

## PLAYING THE BOOMBOX

Filmmakers and film companies began to adapt hip-hop subculture to the big screen in the early to mid-1980s. Given that hip-hop had marginal visibility and audibility in commercial broadcast media, such films offered mass audiences an illustration of the defining sonic and visual components of New York's hip-hop scene. The first feature narrative film to do so was *Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1982), an independent production born from artist and rap promoter Fab 5 Freddy's desire to make a film that placed hip-hop subculture in a "more interesting light" as a counterpoint to the "negative press that people from the hood got."[33] Specifically, Fab 5 Freddy was interested in using the medium of cinema to demonstrate how hip-hop is constituted by "music, dance and . . . visual art."[34] The production pursued these aims by casting real-life participants in said subculture—including graffiti artists, rappers, deejays, breakdancers, and promoters—as fictional versions of themselves. In so doing, *Wild Style* offered a counterpoint to apocalyptic cinematic visions of the South Bronx. As Michael Ventura observes, cinematic images of the South Bronx during New York's process of urban renewal depicted the region as "a symbol of ruin" in films including *Wolfen* (Michael Wadleigh, 1981) and *Fort Apache, The Bronx* (Daniel Petrie, 1981)—the latter of which was denounced by Bronx community groups and representatives for its negative depiction of Black and Puerto Rican residents.[35] The aforementioned geographic elements of hip-hop offered a grassroots counterpoint, as early hip-hop films portrayed the borough as a space of decisively unorthodox creative activity. Such intentions are made clear when *Wild Style*'s camera observes the city's iconography via a subway window over nondiegetic music in which Grandmaster Caz asserts that many people see the South Bronx as "Full of frustration and poverty / But wait that's not how it looks to me."

31 John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts, "Subcultures, Cultures and Class," in *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (London: Routledge, 1993), 45–48 (emphasis in the original).

32 Attali, *Noise*, 11.

33 Quoted in Alex Gale, "The Oral History of 'Wild Style,'" *Complex*, October 11, 2013, https://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2013/10/oral-history-wild-style.

34 Quoted in Gale.

35 Michael Ventura, *Shadow Dancing in the USA* (Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1986), 180–185; and Selwyn Raab, "Film Image Provokes Outcry in South Bronx," *New York Times*, February 6, 1981, C6.

Figure 3. A boombox user enjoys a rap battle in *Wild Style* (First Run Features, 1982).

While *Wild Style*'s vision of South Bronx hip-hop focuses on the work of a graffiti artist (played by real-life artist Lee Quiñones), the boombox is a visible tool across the subculture's music and dance-based components. The film's first rap battle ("M.C. Battle"), between Busy Bee and Lil' Rodney Cee, includes a close-up shot of an onlooker grooving while vertically holding a boombox on his side (see Figure 3). It is unclear whether the bearer of the boombox is recording the battle or simply including the device as part of a hip-hop uniform—a DJ produces the battle's backing music—but this shot nonetheless distills the presence of the boombox in live hip-hop performances during the early years of the genre. This moment is echoed during a climactic Lower East Side performance late in the film, as a boombox is prominently placed on a table from which the DJ produces beats. And in a montage that illustrates Fab 5 Freddy's intention to display the intersecting components of hip-hop within the film, another boombox is visible during a breakdance competition that is intercut with Grandmaster Flash's deejay practice session (providing the music by which the sequence is cut together) and Quiñones's graffiti-making. *Wild Style* portrays the boombox as a tool that participates in the sonic and visual components that make up hip-hop subculture, which altogether produce a vision of life on the South Bronx that counters mainstream moving image representation.

The boombox is more prominent in *Beat Street* (Stan Lathan, 1984), one of the first hip-hop films distributed by a Hollywood production company, Orion Pictures. Following its title card, *Beat Street* opens with a close-up of a boombox

that sets the stage for an opening credits montage that exhibits street dancing on New York City sidewalks, juxtaposed with still images of the film's dancer, DJ, rapper, and graffiti artist characters. Like *Wild Style*, *Beat Street* presents these activities as constitutive of hip-hop subculture, but in this case establishes the boombox, the film's first visual source of music, as a central tool for said constitution. This perspective is echoed later in the film when graffiti artist Ramo (Jon Chardiet) paints the exterior of a subway car with an image of a boombox producing a colorful array of musical notes foregrounded by the words "HIP HOP DON'T STOP." Beyond giving the boombox primacy in tying together the activities that make up hip-hop subculture, *Beat Street* establishes a dynamic visual language for depicting it, giving the device cinematic significance beyond its incidental placement in the events of *Wild Style*. When rival street dance groups the Beat Street Breakers (played by the New York City Breakers) and the Bronx Rockers (played by the Rock Steady Crew) meet while walking between terminals of the subway system, one dancer's placement of the boombox on the floor signals the start of competition over who wins control of this space, dramatized by a shot in which the camera tracks toward the device. Placing the camera at the boombox's level (also seen in the film's opening shot) and accompanying this with a dramatic camera movement exhibits a sense of its power, visually emphasizing the device's audible force that confers upon it the importance shared among the subculture.

Both *Wild Style* and *Beat Street* offer counterpoints to the dominant narratives of hip-hop subculture evident across municipal policy and city journalism. Rather than see graffiti art, street dancing, and boomboxes as evidence of urban decay, such films were produced, both inside and outside of Hollywood, to take seriously hip-hop subculture as a vernacular art form responding to urban neglect. Indeed, producer Harry Belafonte sought to make *Beat Street* in order to show hip-hop "as an urban art form . . . in all of its purity" before it would inevitably become "co-opted by white people."[36] In these films, the boombox plays an evident role in the formation of this urban art form, establishing the groundwork for socialization and subcultural competition in its employment as a conspicuous presence during live performance, a practical device for staging street dancing, a metaphor for the production of hip-hop writ large, and a means for structuring the rules of the hip-hop underground. The boombox's presence during *Wild Style*'s live performances is particularly indicative of the device's larger social functions in developing a hip-hop community. Before hip-hop gained recognition on radio and television, its music was shared among New York City listeners via cassettes recorded at parties in the South Bronx, captured through the mixing board or recorded live via a boombox.[37] Boomboxes thus became a means for participants in hip-hop subculture to record, share, and exchange their music in its operation as a device for taping music events, fostering a network of traded and copied cassettes, and "broadcasting" hip-hop onto

36 Quoted from Jon Chardiet in David Pescovitz, "Beat Street, An Oral History of the 1984 Hip-Hop Film," *BoingBoing*, August 18, 2014, https://boingboing.net/2014/08/18/beat-street-an-oral-history-o.html.

37 "The History of the Boombox," NPR Music, YouTube, 10:44, April 22, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e84hf5aUmNA.

city streets. In this respect, boomboxes helped structure an underground alternative to the music industry's exclusionary and expensive points of entry, providing a consumer substitute to both the recording studio and the radio station. Such tactics are rooted within a history of overlooked Black technological intervention and labor. As Rose observes, "Many of [rap's] musical practitioners were trained to repair and maintain new technologies for the privileged but have instead used these technologies as primary tools for alternative cultural expression."[38] This domain over consumer technologies has distinct antecedents. As Art M. Blake shows, the CB radio was adopted by Black users to drown out "the dominant commercial culture" and the sounds and voices "of racism and segregation through distinctively black speech backed by necessarily self-sufficient black technical prowess."[39] Outside the US context, Frantz Fanon chronicled how colonized Algerians transformed radio from the voice of the colonizer to a medium for anti-colonialist organization and consciousness-raising, with radio broadcasters having to quickly adapt to French frequency-jamming and other strategies of technological control.[40] Boombox use reverberated this legacy of radical tinkering into the spatial politics of a gentrifying New York City.

Looking beyond the subcultural operations of hip-hop, two films at the turn of the decade imagined possibilities that extended from the boombox's use as a tool for unsanctioned broadcasting, employing the device as a means to organize underground coalitions in New York City. In the gangster-fantasia studio film *The Warriors* (Walter Hill, 1979), Cyrus (Roger Hill), the respected leader of New York's most powerful gang, the all-Black Gramercy Riffs, is murdered after proposing that the city's gangs join forces to overpower the police in controlling the city. A multiracial gang, the Warriors, is framed for Cyrus's death and are chased through the city, from the Bronx's Van Cortlandt Park to their home territory of Coney Island. Their journey is chronicled by an unnamed Black woman DJ (Lynne Thigpen) who, by informing rival gangs of the Warriors' journey, takes on the function of the film's narrator, occupying a space that is both inside and adjacent to the film's diegesis. In the absence of Cyrus's organizing authority, Thigpen's DJ sends out a message to the "street people with an ear for the action" from the Gramercy Riffs by playing Arnold McCuller's cover of Martha and the Vandellas' "Nowhere to Run," thereby broadcasting a message for rival groups to target the Warriors. The song plays continuously over a montage of empty city streets until these images are interrupted by a sequence of various gangs listening to the song and preparing for conflict, with the source of the DJ's broadcast often visible. While one gang hears the song over a baseball field's PA system, two others hear it via boombox: one member of an unidentified gang plays the broadcast over his shoulder while walking with his compatriots down a street, and the Turnbull ACs listen to the broadcast through a device

38 Rose, *Black Noise*, 63.

39 Art M. Blake, "Audible Citizenship and Audiomobility: Race, Technology, and CB Radio," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (September 2011): 532, https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2011.0049.

40 Frantz Fanon, "This Is the Voice of Algeria," in *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 69–98.

atop the front of their bus, revealed in a horizontal tracking shot. These boomboxes offer diegetic sources for the announcement and function as a sound bridge that unites the visual elements of this montage. In so doing, the film establishes the device as a means to communicate calls to action that are legible to an underground population competing for control over the city.

*The Warriors* was produced during a period in which rising crime in New York City, particularly in the Warriors' home of Coney Island, was widely publicized.[41] But director Walter Hill sought to depict what he called "the gang situation" outside of the "social problem" film genre.[42] In presenting a subterranean network of rival gangs as spectacularly distinguished—sporting elaborate costumes that serve as uniforms—while using moving comic pages to remediate and set the exaggerated tone for its story, *The Warriors* transformed dominant narratives about city crime into a self-conscious juvenile fantasy of urban delinquency. The boombox's constitutive role as a sound bridge brings together subterranean factions of the city in this fantasized conflict over urban domination in which traditional loci of power seem not to exist. While the film never realizes Cyrus's vision of a collective grassroots takeover, mediated echoes of Thigpen's voice across the city suggest other means for cohering these factions toward shared urban control.

The boombox serves a similar function in *Born in Flames* (Lizzie Borden, 1983) but works toward bringing together an underground network distinct from dominant gendered connotations of boombox use. The independent feature is a work of speculative fiction, imagining an alternative United States as it celebrates the tenth anniversary of its transition into a social democracy. In the film, intersecting feminist groups in New York City endeavor to highlight issues of racism, classism, and heterosexism that have gone unresolved by the transition. The concerns voiced by these groups are initially circulated via two underground radio stations, Radio Ragazza and Phoenix Radio, that broadcast manifestos, statements of solidarity, and feminist punk rock. These broadcasts buttress the efforts of women's groups to disrupt more traditional means of media communication, including hacking a presidential television address and the climactic bombing of an antenna atop the World Trade Center. Boomboxes are presented early in the film as instrumental to such efforts. Honey, the Black host of Phoenix Radio, is introduced to the viewer via a broadcast in which she—standing in the radio station and addressing the camera as the Staple Singers' "I'll Take You There" plays in the background—declares Phoenix's dedication "not only for the liberation of women, but for the liberation of all through the freedom of life which is found in music." This introduction is juxtaposed with documentary-style footage of people in the streets of New York listening to the broadcast via boomboxes, including one shot in which a white man with a boombox strapped around his shoulder hands a cassette tape to a person of color and

41 Jackson Connor, "Remember the Warriors: Behind the Chaotic, Drug-Fueled, and Often Terrifying Making of a Cult Classic," *Village Voice*, September 8, 2015, https://www.villagevoice.com/2015/09/08/remember-the-warriors-behind-the-chaotic-drug-fueled-and-often-terrifying-making-of-a-cult-classic/.

42 Robert Markowitz, "Visual History with Walter Hill," Directors Guild of America, February 26, 2007, https://www.dga.org/Craft/VisualHistory/Interviews/Walter-Hill.aspx?Filter=Full+Interview.

another shot in which a group of young Black women listen and dance to the Staple Singers' accompaniment of Honey's manifesto as a boombox sits prominently on a street corner. The disruptive potential of such listening networks is made clear late in the film when both stations are set ablaze, forcing the hosts to conduct mobile broadcasts in stolen U-Hauls.

As in *The Warriors*, the boombox in *Born in Flames* provides a diegetic source for a popular music montage that connects various listeners via an underground radio broadcast. But instead of employing the boombox to cohere masculine youth subcultures, as hip-hop films and *The Warriors* do, the boomboxes of *Born in Flames* serve as devices for feminist awakening and organization. Boomboxes establish a network of ostensibly politicized listeners, united as the recipients of Phoenix Radio's live messages of solidarity, which provides a foundation for the film's organized and escalating multiracial feminist rebellion against a repressive state. *Born in Flames* shares with these other films a perspective of the boombox as a means for constituting subaltern populations and a tool for exercising spatial control. This perspective is evident between hip-hop films' depictions of the device's real-life functions as a tool that travels across elements of hip-hop subculture as well as genre and speculative films' uses of the device as a sound bridge that assembles underground communities around a shared goal.

These cinematic boomboxes exemplify what Alexander Weheliye describes as the "numerous links and relays between twentieth-century black cultural production and sound technologies" that constitute what he terms "sonic Afro-modernity."[43] Building his scholarly intervention from Samuel R. Delany's critique of the prevailing distinctions between "the white boxes of computer technology" and "the black boxes of modern street technology" in which the former are regarded as the forefront of technological culture and the latter are dismissed as disposable consumer objects, Weheliye makes clear that such prevailing assumptions around "black boxes" overlook the intricate relationships between marginalized users and everyday technologies that have fostered potentially radical new relations to modernity.[44] Here Weheliye identifies the connection between the social and monetary value of commercial technologies and the racial connotations with their use, demonstrating how objects take on economic, cultural, and identity-based meanings associated with their dominant or perceived users and practitioners. The metaphorical implications of Delany's distinction are useful for conceptualizing the representational power of consumer objects in cinema. Such meanings are hardly abstract: "the white boxes of computer technology" have played a significant part in the gentrification of the American city, often with the financial and regulatory assistance of state and local governments, while "the black boxes of modern street technology" have been subject to local control. Consumer objects—and, as Weheliye makes clear, sound reproduction technologies in particular—play a role in the social construction of identity and

43 Weheliye, *Phonographies*, 3.

44 Weheliye, 2. Weheliye quotes Delany from Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 192.

power, taking on metonymic significance that references, or even stands in for, identity categories through use, discourse, and representation. A box, in short, can become "Black" via subcultural use and radical tinkering as well as by becoming a target of official control.

## CONTROLLING THE BOOMBOX

Noise complaints in early-1970s New York City directed at portable radio players, such as the transistor radio, inspired city officials to extend noise control efforts to public transportation systems. Alongside "quality of life" policing of subway graffiti, such efforts targeted Black users of portable audio technologies concomitant with the boombox's rise in the consumer landscape.[45] As chronicled by Lilian Radovac, a "crackdown" on users of "portable radios and tape players" inaugurated Mayor Ed Koch's efforts at policing the city's public transit, which precipitated escalating "transit sweeps" in 1982.[46] The presence of portable audio devices on public transportation became a principal site in the struggle over the right to the city, one that resonates today in the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's (MTA) ubiquitous image of the boombox as a forbidden object or activity (see Figure 4). Moreover, public complaints and newspaper discourse over portable radios and tape players made such objects into "a symbol of racialized aural violence that is directed against a fearful white middle-class . . . whose return to the city had been facilitated by urban renewal policies."[47] Indeed, the *New York Times*' reporting throughout the 1980s exhibits revealing patterns in its descriptions of the public backlash against boomboxes, pairing the device with vivid—sometimes violent—active verbs to describe how its sounds affect city dwellers captive to the same public space as this device.[48] The city's "broken windows" approach to policing culminated the long-term developmental trajectory of an urban management philosophy that "conflated the everyday annoyances of city life with criminal acts."[49] The boombox, in the eyes of the city government and the citizens it prioritized, became a racialized device to be feared and controlled.

This official perspective of boombox use resonates onscreen across several films that dramatize the silencing or destruction of boomboxes and even acts of violence against their users. While variant in tone and the extent of their

45 Lilian Radovac, "The Muted City: New York, Noise Control and the Reconfiguration of Urban Space" (PhD diss., McGill University, 2014), 160–175. The boombox made its commercial debut in 1976 and began saturating the market—and city streets—in 1979. Schloss and Boyer, "Urban Echoes," 401.

46 Radovac, "Muted City," 175–180.

47 Radovac, 173.

48 Francis X. Clines described boomboxes as "spilling the sound all over the streets" and "spattering lyric fragments and piston squirts of melody" to which "a listener almost ducks reflexively." Francis X. Clines, "AboutNewYork: Music from the 'Box' Is Their Forte—or Triple Forte," *New York Times*, August 14, 1979, B3. For consumer electronics journalist Hans Fantel, boomboxes were "nasty screamers whose sound would curdle milk at 50 paces" that "infest[ed] city streets." Hans Fantel, "Portable Sound," *New York Times*, September 16, 1984; and Hans Fantel, "Buying Top Stereo with Bottom Dollars," *New York Times*, September 28, 1986, H22.

49 Lilian Radovac, "The 'War on Noise': Sound and Space in LaGuardia's New York," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (September 2011): 756, https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2011.0038.


Figure 4. A contemporary MTA sign forbids smoking, littering, and stereos on public transit—the latter illustrated by a boombox. Photograph by Ashley Elizabeth Palmer, May 2019.

moral judgment, these cinematic moments share a gentrifying gaze that seeks to reinstate urban "order"—that is, an absence of noise—that the boombox disturbs. One of the most overt examples of this gentrifying gaze, *Death Wish II* (Michael Winner, 1982), depicts the boombox as a tool of Black criminal chaos, a mortal threat to the security of the respectable, white upper middle class. As explored by both cinema and crime scholars, the original *Death Wish* (Michael Winner, 1974) joined films like *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971) in echoing a growing "conservative position on crime" against civil policies, such as the Miranda decision, under the backdrop of national news headlines exclaiming rising urban crime rates.[50] Following New York architect Paul Kersey's (Charles Bronson) transformation from tolerant liberal to reactionary vigilante after young criminals kill his wife and rape his daughter, *Death Wish II* extended Paul's project of combating urban crime to 1980s Los Angeles. This change in setting demonstrates the portability of the series' New York–based critique of "soft on crime" criminal justice policy to other major American cities.[51] Commenting on the narrative's geographic move, director Michael Winner stated that the film reflects the "spread" of New York–style street

50 Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 89–94; and Gray Cavender, "Media and Crime Policy: A Reconsideration of David Garland's *The Culture of Control*," *Punishment & Society* 6, no. 3 (2004): 344, https://doi.org/10.1177/1462474504043636.

51 Timothy O. Lenz, *Changing Images of Law in Film & Television Crime Stories* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 118.

crime, making it unnecessary for filmmakers to shoot outside of Hollywood in order to depict it.[52] This view of urban crime is established early in the film. As Paul and his daughter, Carol (Robin Sherwood), enjoy the outdoor market at Olvera Street, Paul is mugged by a group of white and Black criminals, one of whom, Cutter (Laurence Fishburne), wields a boombox as part of a conspicuous wardrobe of youth deviance. The group uses Paul's driver's license to track down his house, break into it, gang rape and assault his housekeeper, Rosario (Silvana Gallardo), and kidnap Carol, who later falls to her death while fleeing following a rape by Black gang member Punkcut (E. Lamont Johnson). As Paul seeks revenge, he uses the sound of Cutter's boombox to track the gang from an abandoned building to a public bus to Point Fermin Park, where he witnesses a black market gun sale. After a shootout ensues, Cutter eventually tries to run away and holds up his boombox to shield his face (see Figure 5). Paul shoots at the device, which breaks in half and reveals Cutter's corpse slumping to the ground against a post, blood streaming down his face from a bullet hole in his forehead. *Death Wish II*'s vigilante fantasy draws from a deep well of cinematic images that have indulged racist stereotypes of Black male savagery; for example, Carol's death visually echoes that of Flora's (Mae Marsh) in *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915). By depicting Cutter's use of the device within a larger narrative about rising urban crime, the film extends such fears to the boombox itself. Destroying the boombox, as Cutter's death indicates, is part of Paul's project of ending what the film perceives as a society permissive of Black criminality, returning control of the city to the white male figure of authority—one whose architect career made him precisely the type of urban professional that the gentrifying American city sought to attract.

Two subsequent 1980s franchise sequels extended a similar perspective to white punks using boomboxes, and these instances are revelatory in their application of this gentrifying gaze to distinct subcultures. In *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (Leonard Nimoy, 1986), twenty-third-century Starfleet officers James T. Kirk (William Shatner) and Spock (Leonard Nimoy) have time traveled to contemporary San Francisco, where they navigate the unfamiliar terrain of late-twentieth-century society. While riding a public bus, the characters encounter a young white male (Kirk Thatcher) wearing a leather jacket and dog collar, sporting a yellow mohawk haircut, and nodding his head to punk music as it loudly projects from a boombox. As other passengers show visible annoyance, Kirk attempts to get the punk's attention, asking him to stop "that noise." The punk reacts by turning the "noise" up louder and, after Kirk repeats his request, flips off the officer. Spock finally intervenes by giving the punk a Vulcan nerve pinch, which—in a moment played for comedy—causes the punk to pass out, his head immediately falling onto the boombox and turning off its sound, an action that the other passengers reward with sustained applause. Despite the film's West Coast setting, director Leonard Nimoy was inspired to include this moment in the film after witnessing someone "blasting" a "gigantic boombox" in New York City. As he stated in the film's DVD

52 Quoted in Chris Chase, "At the Movies: What Making Independent Films Means," *New York Times*, April 24, 1981, C8.

Figure 5. Cutter (Laurence Fishburne) lifts his boombox to shield his face from vigilante bullets in *Death Wish II* (Filmways Pictures, 1982).

commentary, Nimoy took notice of what he viewed as the "arrogance" and "aggressiveness" of "invading people's territory" with the device, adding, "And I thought, if I was Spock, I'd pinch his brains out."[53] While the final product does not rise to the level of imagined violence as "pinch[ing] his brains out," Nimoy, as the film's director, co-writer, and the character who conducts this action, was able to realize this fantasy.[54]

Allowing a horror villain a similar triumph to Nimoy's science-fiction protagonist, *Friday the 13th Part VIII: Jason Takes Manhattan* (Rob Hedden, 1989) finds hockey mask-donning killer Jason Voorhees (Kane Hodder) encountering a group of young white punks listening to rap on a boombox atop a cardboard box in Times Square. Jason knocks the fixture to the ground as he passes by, and the punks respond by threatening him with chains and knives. Jason turns around and, positioned away from the camera, lifts up his mask to reveal an implicitly frightening unseen face, which prompts the punks to run away. In analyzing how slasher villains regulate youth deviance through their violence, Carol J. Clover argues that the killings conducted by such villains take on a conservative function, punishing perceived youth transgressions.[55] Here, Jason serves a consistent social function in his destruction of the boombox, clearing a New York City street of wayward youth and rap music. These scenes position the physical act of silencing the boombox as proportional to the sonic disturbance it produces, using genre characters to reinstate traditional authority in a way that echoes the dominant gentrifying perspective over the device.

53 Leonard Nimoy and William Shatner, "Commentary," Disc 1, *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*, directed by Leonard Nimoy (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2003), DVD.

54 Nimoy shares a "story by" credit with co-screenwriter Harve Bennett.

55 Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 32–35.

Cinematic fantasies of silencing punks' boomboxes may at first speak to the mutual investments of urban hip-hop and punk subcultures, which make them into shared sources of threat from a gentrifying perspective. For example, album cover designer Nick Egan has reminisced on both subcultures as being "closely related," having been "built from protest and dissatisfaction with where they come from."[56] The music video for the Clash's 1981 single "This Is Radio Clash" imagines punk boombox use as constitutive of such relations, connecting the device to hip-hop activities such as graffiti art and depicting it as a radio that interrupts official broadcasts and fosters connections among diverse populations of young New Yorkers. Despite some collaborations between punk and hip-hop musicians as well as their seemingly shared priorities in fighting against a gentrifying city, interactions between these subcultures were not as frequent or harmonious as some accounts suggest. As Benjamin Court argues, during hip-hop's formative years, New York punk was a "white racial project" that, due to its opposition to disco, was unwelcoming of key venues and musical practices from which the city's hip-hop scene grew.[57] *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* and *Friday the 13th Part VIII: Jason Takes Manhattan*—two productions with little interest in mining the factions between these subcultures, unlike *Born in Flames*' depiction of punk rock among several feminist revolutionary factions in contention—collapse visual and aural signifiers of punk and hip-hop into a general category of noisy blight. This is not to say that these scenes de-racialize the boombox itself: the punks in the latter are audibly using the boombox to listen to rap and, while such aural signifiers are absent in the former, *The Voyage Home*'s screenplay introduces the boombox with the term "ghetto blaster," a loaded signification connecting the device's noise to race and place and an example of how antiblack rhetoric can extend to white subcultures.[58] In collapsing two contemporaneous but distinct urban subcultures, these films' gentrifying gazes serve as a reminder that "punk" has an extensive history as a mutable term whose many meanings—whether describing juvenile delinquents, prostitutes, or, within an African American vernacular, "passive" gay men—have shared their utility as a linguistic tool for Othering.[59] Within the gentrifying gaze, all boombox users are punks: noisy nuisances to an urban order whose undesirability is amplified by a racialized tool for music that the hegemon cannot ignore.

While adopting the gentrifying gaze of the boombox, the abovementioned films acknowledge the device's power to draw attention to itself and its users through its defiant audible and physical presence. This capacity, the boombox's potential to transform public space, has been part of its encoded meaning and discourse outside of cinema. Panasonic's early-1980s advertising campaign, featuring rhythm and blues, soul-funk group Earth, Wind & Fire,

56 Quoted in Owerko, *Boombox Project*, 85.

57 Benjamin Court, "Racialising Amateurism: Punk and Rap," *Third Text* 34, no. 1 (2020): 50–58, https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2019.1663686.

58 Herve Bennett and Nicholas Meyer, "Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home" (unpublished manuscript, March 11, 1986), http://www.scifiscripts.com/scripts/Trek/Star_Trek_IV.htm.

59 Tavia Nyong'o, "Brown Punk: Kalup Linzy's Musical Anticipations," *Drama Review* 54, no. 3 (2010): 75, https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00005.

exemplifies such encoding. One thirty-second ad begins with a boombox the size of a building descending like a spaceship onto a city street flanked by brownstones. The cassette deck opens like the door of a flying saucer, with light and smoke emanating from it, and, in a dissolve, Earth, Wind & Fire descend from the giant deck onto the street. Each member carries a different model of the Panasonic Platinum Box on their shoulder as the group delivers a rap style promotion explaining how the device's features will help the customer "carry the beat right into the street." This campaign contemporaneously produced a print ad that shows the group standing with their respective boomboxes on a city street, with the giant spaceship-boombox forming a wall behind them as neighbors quizzically gaze upon the scene (see Figure 6).

The elements of Afrofuturism evident in Panasonic's campaign indicate the possibilities that both hip-hop and advertisements encouraged users to imagine: the boombox as a piece of street technology that could enable users to transcend the limits of their existing relationship to space. To highlight such imagined transcendence in musical form, one of LL Cool J's first singles, "I Can't Live Without My Radio" (1985), illustrates how traveling with a boombox affects the materiality of urban space in a decisively masculine performance of urban control. The lyrics "Walkin' down the street to the hardcore beat / While my JVC vibrates the concrete" put into practice what Rashad Shabazz calls hip-hop's performances of "hegemonic masculinity" that seek "access to and control of the public domain."[60] These cultural texts exemplify the boombox's status as a technology through which Black male users could reimagine the urban spaces that have otherwise exercised determinative power over their bodies. While radio, as described by Blake, has allowed Black users "to throw off their physical and political immobility by mobilizing their sound, their voices, even while their bodies [stay] unobtrusively in place," the direct, physical connection between the body of the boombox user and the device itself—manifested via dancing and streetwalking—articulates a conspicuously visible social performance of its sonic affect.[61]

Few films illustrate both the potentialities and threats entailed in such embodied performances of spatial ownership as vividly as *Do the Right Thing* does with the character of Radio Raheem, a stoic physical presence played by six-foot-four actor Bill Nunn, who carries a large Tecsonic Super Jumbo boombox throughout the film. "Fight the Power" serves as Radio Raheem's Black youth anthem, a song played diegetically on his boombox approximately ten times as he wanders a block of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. As his name implies, Raheem's radio is constitutive of his political and cultural identity, a device that extends the structural politicization of his "noisy" Black body through the spatial destabilization of the boombox. Writer-director Spike Lee uses music in the film, as Victoria E. Johnson argues, "as interactive with and an essential component of visual representation and thematic, political concerns," where Raheem's boombox is the conduit through

60 Rashad Shabazz, "Masculinity and the Mic: Confronting the Uneven Geography of Hip-Hop," *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 21, no. 3 (January 2014): 370–386, https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.781016.

61 Blake, "Audible Citizenship," 532.


Figure 6. Earth, Wind & Fire promote the boombox as a tool for occupying urban space in a Panasonic advertisement, circa 1980.

which such concerns—particularly in relation to urban space and power—are expressed.[62]

For Lee, the sonic occupation of space portended by the boombox could animate greater spatial conflicts around private property, youth music cul-

62 Victoria E. Johnson, "Polyphony and Cultural Expression: Interpreting Musical Traditions in 'Do the Right Thing,'" *Film Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (Winter 1993–1994): 20, https://doi.org/10.2307/1213199.

ture, and racial power in contemporary New York City. While writing *Do the Right Thing*, Lee searched for a narrative device through which everyday racism experienced within a historically Black, multicultural, intergenerational neighborhood would culminate into a fatal act of police brutality, to which members of the community respond by destroying the local pizzeria where identity-based tensions had played out. Motivated by recent real-life incidents of police brutality against Black New Yorkers, including the deaths of Michael Stewart and Eleanor Bumpurs, Lee wrote in his production diary, "What would happen if a Black youth came into the pizzeria with a giant box blasting rap?"[63] He credited the inspiration to a "major disturbance" at Brooklyn College "between Black and white students that involved a jukebox. The Jewish kids wanted to listen to their music, the Blacks wanted to hear theirs. Somehow a fight started. That's the little incident I need."[64] The boombox is integral to the film's depiction of a Brooklyn neighborhood whose interpersonal threads are frayed by racism and attendant political issues across public and private spaces, commercial transactions, and social interactions during the hottest day of the summer.

Despite its use as a narrative device to set up Raheem's death, the boombox is not inherently a source of unresolvable conflict throughout the film. In one scene, a group of young Puerto Rican men (played by Luis Ramos, Chris Delaney, Ángel Ramírez, Sixto Ramos, and Nelson Vasquez) socialize as they listen to Rubén Blades's "Tu Y Yo" via a boombox, and the hip-hop sound of Raheem's boombox enters into their sonic space. Stevie (Luis Ramos) takes the presence of Raheem's boombox as a challenge. The camera oscillates freely between the two as they duel over primacy of their shared sonic space via the volume of their respective speakers. Eventually, Stevie turns his inferior boombox volume down and relents. Raheem walks off, his boombox continuing to echo, and pumps a victorious fist into the air. Instead of producing a confrontation that escalates into violence, this scene briefly presents a hybridized social space whose inhabitants do not confuse noise for a meaningful threat and work through competing claims of spatial entitlement culturally. This momentary fusion of Latin and African American music does not sustainably resolve any enduring social or intercultural tensions indicated by this scene, but its meeting between competing forms of nonwhite musical expression is concluded peaceably. In short, this scene imagines how the boombox's noise is made meaningful in the absence of official power.

By contrast, such potentialities are cut short after Raheem transforms the device into a tool for protest. Local activist Buggin' Out (Giancarlo Esposito) arrives to Sal's Pizzeria at closing time to boycott the establishment on the condition that Sal (Danny Aiello) accompany his wall collection of photos of famous Italian Americans with images of famous African Americans to reflect the pizzeria's primary customers. Raheem accompanies Buggin' Out, blaring "Fight the Power" on his boombox. As with other moments when Raheem enters a scene, sound precedes his visible presence: the onscreen revelation of the boombox is accompanied by a camera

63 Spike Lee with Lisa Jones, *Do the Right Thing* (New York: Fireside, 1989), 41, 33. In 1983, Stewart died while under NYPD custody for graffiti-ing the wall of a subway station. In 1984, Bumpurs was shot and killed by an NYPD officer during an eviction.

64 Lee with Jones, *Do the Right Thing*, 40–41.

Figure 7. In *Do the Right Thing*, Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn), Smiley (Roger Guenveur Smith), and Buggin' Out (Giancarlo Esposito) enter Sal's Pizzeria in protest (Universal Pictures, 1989).

movement that emphasizes the device's power. Similar to the dynamic mobile framing that announces the boombox in *Beat Street*, a rapid track backward from a canted angle suggests that Raheem's boombox's force of sound pushes the camera away (see Figure 7). The boombox provides a sonic instrument for Buggin' Out's boycott, allowing patrons to take over the private space of Sal's by occupying the pizzeria's aural space with hip-hop while the visible space of its walls remain unrepresented. In response to Raheem's refusal to turn his music down, Sal screams racist slurs and destroys the boombox with a baseball bat, reacting to the noise of Raheem's display of spatial entitlement with physical force. The ensuing fight between Sal and Raheem leads to Raheem choking Sal outside the pizzeria. Before police arrive and kill Raheem during a chokehold, the camera cranes back, revealing an ad for a stereo system on the exterior wall perpendicular to the façade of Sal's business (see Figure 8). Consistent with subcultures' adoption of material objects, the boombox's compatibility with the rhetoric of consumer capitalism does not contradict its capacity to be perceived as threatening by those whose claims over capitalist enterprise often go unquestioned—in this case, the white business owner.

Raheem's employment of his boombox to alter Sal's privately owned walls ends in tragic failure. But *Do the Right Thing* establishes the stakes of such failure by imagining the transformations the boombox can realize. The film famously ends with scrolling quotes from Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X that explain the former's nonviolent philosophy and the latter's advocacy for self-defense—part of what James C. McKelly calls the film's "culture of ambiguity" in its decisively "unmerged, unresolved, and hopelessly


Figure 8. A crane shot reveals a stereo ad on the exterior wall perpendicular to Sal's Pizzeria in *Do the Right Thing* (Universal Pictures, 1989).

contradictory ideological voices."[65] The boombox's thematic significance is bound up in Raheem's embodiment of this ambiguity. In a rare moment when Raheem sets aside his boombox to speak for himself, he delivers an at-camera monologue to pizza deliveryman Mookie (Spike Lee) and expresses his worldview by sampling dialogue from Robert Mitchum's predatory preacher in *The Night of the Hunter* (Charles Laughton, 1955). Using his brass knuckles (another hip-hop fashion staple) that read "LOVE" and "HATE," Raheem energetically stages a boxing match between the opposing forces, wherein Hate is "K.O.'d by Love," all while "Fight the Power" plays from his boombox. Quoting Raheem after his death, Mookie, who has played the neighborhood's unofficial negotiator of interpersonal conflict throughout the film, yells "Hate!" before he launches the trashcan through Sal's window, inciting a rebellion. Mookie's destruction echoes Raheem's interpretation of love as an active confrontation against hate. Indeed, Raheem's thematic statement situates the boombox—an interlocutor of his voice—as a device that puts into practice what McKelly terms Raheem's "moral cosmology": that is, a deliberate magnification of conflict in search of liberation.[66]

What might such liberation look and sound like? The boombox's potential as a device for imagined ownership over urban space by young persons of color is established in *Do the Right Thing*'s opening credits sequence, when Tina (Mookie's girlfriend, played by Rosie Perez) dances in front of studio

65 James C. McKelly, "The Double Truth, Ruth: *Do the Right Thing* and the Culture of Ambiguity," *African American Review* 32, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 223, https://doi.org/10.2307/3042120.

66 McKelly, 218.

backdrops of the film's neighborhood. As "Fight the Power" plays, Tina performs assertive hip-hop choreography and eventually appears in boxing gear, integrating punches into her routine. Although a boombox is not present in this sequence, it establishes several ideas that the device mobilizes throughout the film in association with this song. Namely, Tina's dance performs autonomy over (a simulation of) urban space, freedom from the conditions that create marginalization, and a joyful disregard for norms governing "respectable" public self-presentation, all through a combination of song and dance that dramatizes fighting against systemic oppression. Her self-possessed performance puts into stark relief the fact that no character of color in the film possesses a comparable degree of authority over the city block—especially Tina, who is isolated to an apartment caring for her and Mookie's baby for the duration of the film, her bodily autonomy even more limited than that of male characters. When the song emerges from Raheem's boombox in the film's diegesis, this fantasy of sonic control over urban space is isolated to Raheem's decisively masculine hip-hop performance. What such a device, or performance through use, might mean for Tina to claim spatial control goes unrealized.

*Do the Right Thing* employs the boombox to render audible and visible the gap between certain fantasies of nonwhite control over the space of the city and the white hegemonic backlash that can result, particularly when such fantasies transform into a direct claim of spatial entitlement. When Sal annihilates Raheem's boombox with a baseball bat (destroying his individual source of empowerment before police murder Raheem himself), this is an action manifested by a belief shared among the gentrifying class that the sound projected by a boombox is itself a form of violence—a belief whose mainstream acceptance had been echoed across city newspapers and policies, legitimating physical retaliation, even murder, as a proportional response. Returning to Chuck D's phrasing, the meanings that the gentrifying city place on the ineluctable noise of Raheem's skin are made undeniable by its amplification.

## ECHOES OF THE BOOMBOX

Individual listening devices such as the Walkman came to displace the boombox within the portable music market, promising consumers the freedom to exercise control over their musical taste while dissociating from their surrounding environment.[67] Yet music continued its mobile reverberations through space via other technologies such as car stereos—systems located within automotive technologies that, for the Black driver or passenger, presented what Amanda Nell Edgar terms "a paradox of space, both allowing black US Americans to escape spaces of racial aggression and requiring black families to navigate hostile spaces."[68] The intersection of freedom and risk in Black automobility came to a violent head in the 2012 murder of Black teenager Jordan Davis by white software developer Michael Dunn in a Jacksonville,

67 As Radovac shows, the Walkman befit New York's gentrifying priorities, illustrated by what the *New York Times* termed its "civilized alternative to the noise box." Quoted in Radovac, "Muted City," 192.

68 Amanda Nell Edgar, "Listening to Music in Cars While Black: Popular Music, Automobility, and the Murder of Jordan Davis," in *Popular Music and Automobiles*, ed. Mark Duffett and Beate Peter (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 140.

Florida gas station parking lot. As depicted in the documentary *3 1/2 Minutes, 10 Bullets* (Marc Silver, 2015), Dunn became angry due to the rap music playing from a car stereo occupied by Davis and his friends. Dunn's official defense in court, however, conjured a phantom weapon brandished by Davis and invoked Florida's Stand Your Ground law, which established that a person does not have a duty to retreat from a perceived threat. The law positions the person who responds to a perceived threat as owning the space where conflict occurred ("*your* ground"), and Dunn's defense adopted its uninterrogated presumption that the public parking lot belonged to him. Whether Dunn actually believed he saw a weapon hardly matters, for his actions are part of a history of treating "Black noise" as itself tantamount to violence against the presumptive sovereign over shared space. Dunn's defense literalized what white reactionaries hear in the presence of Black music at a high volume, synthesizing the racist slippage between sonic disturbance and physical threat. Such was the perspective that helped make the boombox a potent site of conflict, sounding out socio-spatial struggles that echo into the present.

Beyond sonic devices specifically, consumer technologies offer continued means for filmmakers to imagine ways to navigate such struggles. In the 2019 Spike Lee–produced Netflix film *See You Yesterday* (Stefon Bristol), two Black teenagers (Eden Duncan-Smith and Danté Crichlow) from East Flatbush, Brooklyn tinker with existing tech parts and supplies from the Bronx High School of Science to invent backpacks for time travel, supporting their ventures by repairing their neighbors' aging devices. When one character's older brother is shot by an aggressive police officer who mistakes him for a bodega robber, the teenagers utilize their makeshift time travel machines in an effort to stop the encounter and control the future. Their temporal journeys are guided by their iPhones—a ubiquitous consumer technology that their community uses to film police encounters. By adapting such real-life uses of iPhones as a tool for time travel, *See You Yesterday* augments and reimagines the device's potential to witness, understand, revisit, or, perhaps, prevent Black death on the streets of New York City.

Marginalized populations have continually found within new technologies emergent means for exercising autonomy, self-expression, and strategic organization in the face of old problems such as American antiblackness. Narrative filmmaking has displayed the potential to reinforce dominant perspectives on these devices, unpack their cultural politics, or, for some filmmakers, provide a platform for imagining how everyday technologies can become tools for (re)claiming one's right to the city.

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