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## Media Images of the Urban the South Bronx in Film

Katherine Simpson

### ABSTRACT

This essay will argue the importance of film media

American attitudes towards race in an urban context  
Hollywood's changing representation of the South  
of urban ills in American inner cities in the 1970s and  
representation became more positive in the 1990s  
"chicken and egg" syndrome: whether media only  
influences behavior and in turn reality. First it will  
of the Bronx in a historical context, particularly be  
Bronx paralleled the decline of many urban areas and  
will be posed as to the future of inner city areas in  
picture of the inner city is looking rosier. Is this change  
economic change? Will it disappear once the economy  
or is it part of a wider trend, a reinvestment in our  
of September 11 impact on Hollywood's representation  
[Key words: South Bronx, film and media studies, 1

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Two policemen sit in a car next to an abandoned  
train passes by, a tall, attractive black woman  
street toward them. It's obvious when she comes  
She's wearing a flowered, sleeveless dress; her

her left hand.

"Ain't she freezing?" one officer asks the other.

"No, she's so wacked she thinks she's in the Bahamas."

With a stoned smile on her face, she leans over exposing her ample cleavage.

“Y’all wanna come party with me? I got someth

Suddenly, the woman grabs a gun from her pu  
officers. As she walks off unsteadily over the ru  
emerge slowly out of the surrounding abandon  
the dead officers, pulling one of them half way

The opening scene of *Fort Apache: the Bronx* clearly sets a  
residents will be represented in this film, a representa  
its large American audiences. Charlotte, the prostitute  
Grier, represents the South Bronx to the outside world  
dangerous. Hollywood’s images of the urban landscap  
exaggerations of earlier historical anxieties about citie  
reactions to the realities of urban problems. The South  
devastation of urban areas in the 1970s, was a symbol  
world of what had gone wrong in urban America.

In its earlier history, this neighborhood became a “s  
American dream”; the borough was a shining example  
boulevards, the Grand Concourse, was proudly model  
The Bronx was a step on the road to success for its im  
and ‘80s, the lower Bronx, renamed the South Bronx, v  
The neighborhood had become emblematic of aband  
Americans were shocked by images of this scarred nei  
buildings and rubble-strewn lots seen in film, televisio  
Visits by Presidents Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and  
infamous Charlotte Street did little to change the deva  
lamented the disappearance of their bustling neighbo  
continually compared the area south of the Cross Bro  
and Dresden. By the 1980s, the entire borough carried

Visual media in the late 1970s and ‘80s had a powerf  
depiction of cities. Media portrayal of the South Bron  
areas in the 1970s and ‘80s reflected real problems. Fil  
public’s fears and perceptions, however, particularly v  
concerned. Although the lower end of the borough wa  
the past two decades, by the 1990s, newspaper and m  
the South Bronx an urban miracle. The South Bronx stil  
terrible schools, and problems with crime. However, a  
place by the 1990s.

By the year 2001, prior to the tragedy of September 11, 2001, the media appeared to be softening its manner of presenting cities and their treatment of the South Bronx and its residents suggest that the implications for America's cities and American attitudes of two films, 1980's *Fort Apache: the Bronx* and *Finding Forrester* will indicate a change in the way Hollywood represents cities. This marked difference raises some essential questions about a shift in the media's focus and what it says about the world.

### **What Is the South Bronx?**

Whether seen as a whole or in its constituent parts, the South Bronx is a culture and group cultures, reflecting its values.

The South Bronx is not an exact location. Economics and its boundaries. In the late 1960s, the area was designated as the Grand Central Expressway. As blight spread and middle class white residents moved farther north to Fordham Road. In 1995, New York City resident naming the border as Mosholu Parkway, ever since the Bronx Borough President's office, tired of the stigma, no longer existed as a term, and stated that people were using names or the name of the entire borough instead. Whether the name and the designation of its exact boundaries may be in question, it was still used to describe the southern end of the borough. The South Bronx will indicate the area south of Fordham Road.

### **Image and Reality: Visual Culture and Race**

...white middle class imagination, absent from a city's conditions, magnifies the perceived threat.

The professional middle class generally avoids the city and escapes from them to greener suburbs, or mys...

America has become a more visual culture with the rise of television. The national impact of the image has become a written word.<sup>10</sup> As a result, in the 1980s and '90s, people remember the dark streets full of pimps, hookers, burglars from the films *Fort Apache: the Bronx* and *Bonfire of the Vanities* in 1977 announcing the burning of the Bronx while images of the riot appeared on the television screen. It was less probable that people would remember a newspaper article discussing economic recovery or the need for new housing. Films allow us to look at what images are most successful; the media industry is in selling these images to us, and they give us an important glimpse at societal attitudes.

In the 1950s and '60s, filmmakers dealing with urban poverty used exaggeration. After the racialization of poverty in the 1950s, however, films began to draw an even more obvious racial line. They showed police officers and "deviant" black and Latino city residents in inner-city neighborhoods. By exaggerating the worst of urban warfare,

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In the 1980s and '90s, Hollywood merely exaggerated a trend that had already taken hold: the fascination with the dramatic, violent images of urban blight. This is apparent when films using such images are successful. People go to films for many reasons, and stereotypical images of inner-city life sell to viewers, as is apparent when the news media focuses on images of poverty in order to attract more viewers.<sup>14</sup> Like onlookers at a car accident slowing down traffic on a freeway, moviegoers flock to *Fort Apache* in the 1980s for a voyeuristic glimpse into this urban world. The success of films such as *Fort Apache* encouraged Hollywood to create images of urban problems and simplified "blame the victim" explanations.

Hollywood's racist imagery played a large part in the national imagination of the world in television and film. To filmgoers, the city became a nightmarish world of crime; the threat of violence was

urban blight in the 1980s and '90s, particularly with the rise of the crack epidemic, bordered on panic. Words for urban problems such as "ghetto" and "inner city" have become code words for race.<sup>17</sup> From the mid-1800s to the

concept of race was used in cities in the northeast to keep Italians and Jews as well as blacks, Latinos, and others out of white Protestants, particularly in housing. By the 1950s, the term "white" was considered white, which had become an all-encompassing term for people of European descent, isolating inner cities and blacks. Film identified cities with "crime, minorities, deterioration, and abandoned buildings."<sup>9</sup> Hollywood's sensational and lurid films even further irrational equation of race with crime. Film amplified white America's terror of inner-city blacks and

The myths in blockbuster films have a rippling effect on the public and their view of cities, but also on policymakers. The "broken window theory," researchers left two cars in the street, one with a broken window and one without. They noticed how the cars with the broken window were more likely to be vandalized. The broken window theory was used to stress the importance of the city's physical environment and residents' attitudes and actions. In the same way, once a city or a neighborhood is perceived as "broken," it is difficult to reverse that perception. Irrational fear of threat may replace an analysis of real causes and solutions for more security when it may be unnecessary. Such urban myths can even affect city planning concerning the architecture of public spaces. A domino effect, "Fear proves itself."<sup>3</sup> In the South Bronx, city officials realized the importance of perception. This was an official's pitiful attempt to make people on the freeway feel safe in a dangerous neighborhood differently by putting colorful decals on the sides of buildings,<sup>24</sup> demonstrating an awareness of the importance of perception in an intelligent decision about how to address it. The power of perception and opinion has grown enormously in the 20th century.<sup>25</sup>

Politicians unfamiliar with urban America may be a problem. Government officials living in the suburbs are as likely to be ignorant as any other citizen. Important decisions on issues such as where new locations are constructed are affected by a misperception of reality. This is why citizens and politicians in inner-city areas are often skeptical of what mass media depicts their communities: they realize the

effect on both public perception of urban areas as well as affect those neighborhoods. For areas such as the South Bronx, the media spotlight, images become crucial to the way the neighborhood is perceived. These depictions become even more important when they represent urban communities across the country.

Films made about Los Angeles and New York exemplify the impact that the 1980s and '90s did for the image of cities and stereotypes. Many of the films associated blacks and Latinos with crime, immorality, and violence, blaming residents of troubled urban areas for unemployment and social problems rather than exploring the complexity of urban troubles. The genres, white male protagonists, often police officers, and characters, black, or Mexican gang members, drug addicts, and other marginalized groups. Movies such as *Colors* set in Los Angeles, and *Fort Apache* with their pseudo cinema verite style, particularly *Fort Apache* with its story of two policemen in a South Bronx precinct, they have had a lasting impact with reality in the minds of the viewing public.

Film is a powerful medium, one that thrives on violence and drama. It tends to have a lag time, creating a perception based on a single moment that remain in American's collective memories much longer than the actual event, considering. Films about cities in the 1980s and '90s continued to influence previous decades. Thus, in the 1980s, many Hollywood films depicted the devastation of the inner cities, even when some areas showed signs of change. Movies focusing on crime in America during the '90s had a lasting effect, creating images in the minds of the viewing public across the country. As a result, when many Americans thought of the South Bronx years after the film was made, they pictured it looking like the 1970s South Bronx. Although it is difficult to reverse the impact, the city appeared to be changing its approach to inner-city areas.

## Two Films: the Changing Image of the South Bronx

...film is a chronological form. Every technical element is designed to tell a story about social imagination.

If people cannot give us the credit we deserve, we will be stomping grounds in movies...We are not a fiction.

The South Bronx has been a symbol of troubled inner-city areas across the country, an "international code word for our epoch's social ills" since the 1970s. The national news typically puts large

spotlight : what happened in the Bronx was a drastic change across the country. It was a shocking descent: the downward spiral "so painful for the national psyche it transcended into



Vergara's *New American Ghettos* chronicles the decline of the South Bronx from the 1970s onward in photos of Newark, the South Bronx, and Detroit. The pages look eerily similar: abandoned buildings rotting with garbage and rubble; once graceful historic arches and libraries, schools, and government offices are drab, square, and rot on lonely streets and fire escapes. What once represented the American dream is now a tragic inversion of the American dream.

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Metaphors for urban blight in the South Bronx were often framed as disease, reflecting the country's anxiety over the situation and reluctance to come to terms with real problems. Associated with disease and destruction contributed to the hysteria surrounding the South Bronx. The South Bronx was compared to post-war Dresden, and the Cross Bronx Expressway was likened to the Maginot Line. In the 20th century, a war was fought in a faraway place: imagine a suburb where suburbanites unwilling to concern themselves with urban blight was compared to a tooth infection needing to be removed. The problems of the South Bronx have been compared to a cancerous tumor attacking the body of the borough.<sup>40</sup> The danger in these metaphors allowed the country to avoid responsibility for what happened. An enemy or a disease made it easier to separate oneself from the problem.

As the economy turned upwards in the 1990s, this trend continued. In some cases even reverse to the idealism of an earlier era. During the recovery period, the South Bronx was "the edge of deindustrialization and urbanism in this country";<sup>41</sup> it was an example of economic revitalization in troubled neighborhoods.<sup>42</sup> Words such as "resurrection" and "rebirth" described what had happened in the Bronx as well as in other regions. Lauding the South Bronx became almost a cliché. In 1994, Governor Pataki declared that the Bronx was "no longer a war zone."<sup>43</sup> New York's revitalization of inner-city neighborhoods, often referring



Bronx did improve substantially by the year 2000, the borough in the city. Celebrating a complete recovery v idealistic trend appeared to have had an affect on Holl

The films *Fort Apache* and *Finding Forrester*, almost polar portray the South Bronx, exemplify how much Hollywood their portrayal of inner-city neighborhoods. *Fort Apache* (*Finding Forrester* (2000)).

*Fort Apache* is infamous for demonizing the South Br dismissed by critics, it was widely seen. The film was c release and, later on, for depicting the Bronx as “a sym. The film is based on a real life police officer’s account dangerous precincts in the Bronx, the 41st, nicknamed *Fort Apache*. Starring Paul Newman in the role of Murphy, the whit focuses on the events surrounding the precinct and th *Apache* opened with a disclaimer: it stated that because film, “it does not deal with the law abiding members o announcement stated that the film would not consid and groups who are struggling to turn the Bronx arou film proceeded to vilify black and Latino residents of t referred to the irony of the movie’s opening assertion. “The movie immortalized the borough as an unparalle of hell.”<sup>46</sup> Journalists asked, “Who’s going to remembe

Even in its title and throughout the film, war metapl One officer calls the police station a “fort in hostile ter says, “You’d be better off walking a beat in Beirut than

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to stop in the neighborhood when his car breaks down pulling off the highway “into this jungle.” He is enticed character, into an abandoned building, where she sed she can slit his throat. This scene is a classic example c

of black and Latino inner-city neighborhoods. The fre or upper-middle-class city residents did not have to go Stepping (or driving) into them meant risking one’s lif

The depiction of residents of the South Bronx was a and community groups alike. In the credits of Fort Apache given names. Most of the neighborhood characters are the credits as Wild-Eyed Man, Hooker #1, Hooker #2, I and Pimp. References to the South Bronx as a jungle in animals. Fort Apache shows the residents of the neighborhood of screaming, disorderly crowds of people. Crowds appear to congregate at the police station, where an anonymous character corners children while they run wildly underfoot. The Transvestite threaten to jump off of a building and again threatens others with a knife. In yet another scene, a man is in a basement and is arrested for illegal cockfighting. At the South Bronx People's Party, a young political organization, supporters surround the station house, an angry character is never shown as individuals. There is no insight into the Party: who their members were and how they came to another extension of the crowd. The mobs are loud, all alike: all of the stereotypes that have been attributed to city neighborhoods.

In Fort Apache there are very few individual characters in the neighborhood, and most of those who do are tragically flawed. The only character who seems to have some integrity is Isabella, the Puerto Rican woman and Murphy's girlfriend. She is calm, educated, professional, and composed. The other characters are not. However, in contrast to Murphy's partner, Isabella sleeps with Murphy on their first date, appealing to the concepts of morality and the stereotype of the hot-blooded Latina. Lying naked in bed, Murphy notices track marks on her back. When she overdoses, stumbling out of her apartment in a daze, she is criticized as well as politicians pointed out how Isabella, with her potential to combat stereotypes, could have been different.

Pam Grier's character is called Charlotte in the credits and is mentioned in the film. In the last scene where she is seen in the film, she imitates a snake, whispering, moving seductively, and slaying a Latino drug dealer. When she slashes him in the face, she slashes the stomach. Both Charlotte and Isabella are sexual objects who die violently. They are meant to be seen as untrustworthy, a murderer, a prostitute, and a drug addict. The audience is a drug addict as well. Reminiscent of the Latina love interest who seduces the white police officer she is dating by sleeping with him, she ultimately disappoints Murphy when he realizes she is not who he thought she was. The depth to these one-dimensional female characters: no

There are no individual male characters from the neighborhood.

the tortured transvestite, who tries to commit suicide; a few sleazy drug dealers, who give Isabella the lethal

Some critics recognized that *Fort Apache* tried to have stereotypes, but that it was not successful in combining a social message: “The movie is clearly an expression of racism...shallowness and clumsiness aren’t the same,” said that he hoped the movie would be a “positive catalyst” for efforts to improve inner-city life. The director defended “stupid” to assume that characters in films represented Ricans.<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately, like earlier films dealing with reinforced stereotypes rather than exposing urban violence in the movies, both politicians and community groups in protest. In 1980, a lawsuit to block filming was thrown out of Court.<sup>54</sup> A group called “Committee against *Fort Apache*” called for a boycott, saying that the film depicted residential violence.<sup>55</sup> Representative Robert Garcia of the Bronx and Congress...we can salvage the area when people across the country were seeing the South Bronx as a chaos at a time when the Bronx was starting to get back

Later, journalists and people who worked and lived in the film’s impact on public perception of their borough, in on policymakers *Fort Apache* is continually mentioned. Los Angeles noted that people there felt that in the Bronx *Apache*.<sup>57</sup> A Daily News editorial in 1993 accused legislators and commercial dinosaurs...ten years later, stuck in the “Warriors”<sup>58</sup> Bernd Zimmerman, Director of the Bronx Economic Development, said that such films “seared images into the national image of the Bronx.” The impact one film has had on the national image of

the power of film media. Both politicians and the general public that these films affected both public perception as well as

In the early 1990s, there were two films made that continued to

of the South Bronx: Like It Like That (1994) and Hanging  
They did not have celebrity actors, and had lower atten  
movies such as Fort Apache, but they set a trend for futur  
Fort Apache, the two films won critical approval. Althou  
for their take on gender, they dealt with serious theme  
crime. At the same time, they were affectionate, funny  
the South Bronx. Their protagonists were black and La  
neighborhood, male and female, rather than white ma

In the tradition of Spike Lee, smaller independent mo  
Hanging With the Homeboys paved the way for films such  
a Hollywood blockbuster movie romanticizing the Sout  
that there was a market for movies showing urban are

Finding Forrester gives a quite sentimentalized depicti  
that runs completely contrary to Hollywood depiction  
The film tells the story of Jamal, a black teenager from  
extraordinarily gifted writer and athlete who meets up

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William Forrester, played by Sean Connery. William Fo  
a writer holed up and shut off from the world in an an  
building next to Jamal's local basketball court. The pl  
from the beginning of the movie that Jamal will draw I  
Forrester helps Jamal with his writing: a classic upliftin  
Like It Like That or Hanging with the Homeboys disli  
Newsday reacted to the film with the description "old w  
young black writer-genius," calling it a "strictly racism  
formula." The reviewer in fact recommends leaving af  
On a website specializing in movie reviews, Finding Forre  
point "rotten tomato meter" 62

The opening shots are a curious mix of images typic  
Bronx and more romantic ones. The film begins with a

he looks straight into the camera. With his voice in the  
montage of Bronx street scenes. There are the usual sc  
buildings, but they are followed by those of neighborh

the street, a father playing with his two sons, hotdog vendor, and a barber shop. In another scene, a woman sits in church with the American flag in the background. All of these are idealized representations of the Bronx residents. By choosing to use these romantic images, the film presents its viewers with a different Hollywood impression of the Bronx.

The housing projects featured in the film look almost idyllic. The scenes of the street cut to a peaceful scene of a man, Chekhov, Joyce, and Ken Kesey, and pan to a close-up of a man about to get up at his mother's wake-up call to go to school.

Jamal's public high school is also idealized. Drugs, violence, and gangs are nonexistent among the Bronx teens. Jamal and his friends play basketball or laughing and talking undisturbed in their classrooms. The school is clean and orderly. A teacher reads poetry to the class. The principal knows Jamal by name. Similar to the housing projects, the characters of *Hanging with the Homeboys* Jamal's apartment project is clean and pleasant, and William Forrester's car is clean and well maintained. Jamal's brother, played by rapper Ice Cube, has a job supervising a parking lot at Yankee Stadium.

Jamal's character, played by Rob Brown, is an idealized representation of stereotypes of black and Puerto Rican characters. Jamal is a sensitive, thoughtful, and idealistic character. Besides being insightful and an excellent writer like Mishima and writing like an accomplished author at school, he is also introspective as well as popular at school. He seems to be a student in the Bronx with his friends, talking with William Forrester, and later in the film, after he transfers to an exclusive private school.

There are only several short scenes vaguely reminiscent of the real Bronx. In one scene, Jamal walks home through his neighborhood at night, the car is abandoned, and a car burns in the background, and a police officer tells Jamal seems uncomfortable, but he is unharmed. In another scene, Jamal is in a building at night with a friend. He asks, "You ever met anybody like that?" The friend answers, "Nobody like that comes around here." This scene reminds the audience of the danger of the neighborhood for outsiders.

There is an interesting inversion of earlier films, where protagonists and black and Puerto Rican characters were villains: the villain in this movie is the white private schooler of plagiarizing. Rather than portraying blacks and Puerto Rican characters, as in *Fort Apache* or *Finding Forrester*, Jamal and his friends are frightened by the reclusive author. In an early scene, Jamal and his friends refer to Forrester as a ghost, and the young men are ordered by Jamal to sneak into Forrester's apartment. When Forrester finally runs out of the apartment, and his friends join him, it is an inversion of earlier Hollywood stereotypes: five young black men speed from an elderly white man in the dead of night.

After Jamal befriends Forrester, there is a rosy, saccharine relationship. There is a tenderness between the two characters when Jamal comes out in Forrester's apt when he falls asleep and takes his bicycle out for a ride in Manhattan when Forrester is overwhelmed by the stadium in old photos in Forrester's apartment highlighting the South Bronx, and there is one sentimental scene when Jamal and Forrester go to Yankee Stadium at night. Jamal's brother allows the two of them to go to the stadium where they stand on the pitcher's mound under the stadium lights.

When William Forrester finally decides to leave his home in the South Bronx for Jamal's rescue, a scene that tries to be warmly comic is a bicycle ride. As Forrester rides nonchalantly through the streets of the South Bronx on his bicycle, signaling when he turns left, the audience is expected to return to the outside world and to root for Jamal's rescue. The streets shown here are the same streets where drug dealers knifed people, robbed apartments and escaped on the fire escapes on the roof. Once shown to inspire fear, they are now being used to inspire hope.

It is quite clear that *Finding Forrester* presents the South Bronx as a romanticized, sentimentalized and idealized urban neighborhood. Its images of the South Bronx are borrowed from *Fort Apache*, which ends with a freeze frame of Muhammad Ali, a Latino criminal whom they have been chasing through the streets of the Bronx is a black man. The South Bronx is a black neighborhood shown in relationship with Manhattan, rather than in relationship with the South Bronx. It is shown as working-class people with steady jobs rather than as a neighborhood of poverty. However, *Finding Forrester* ignores the reality of the problems of the South Bronx such as failing schools, violence, and high unemployment. In this instance, Hollywood now idealizes the same neighborhood that it once depicted as a place of danger and despair.

### **A New Look at the Urban Landscape?**

This is not to say that films must depict urban areas in a realistic way. "Insiders" can represent urban neighborhoods. Protest



Fort Apache and Bonfire of the Vanities are never valid in  
given our First Amendment rights. However, there is a  
Hollywood sees cities in film, an extremely important  
culture today. It may be partly because black and Hispanic  
neighborhoods have more of a voice in film than in the  
that across the country in the 1980s and '90s, urban ar  
The relationship between the city and the suburbs has

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America's perspective on race. Now that cities are full  
fast food restaurants as strip malls, cities are becoming  
appearance. Gentrification has made many urban areas  
income citizens and forced earlier residents out. At the  
beginning to have the same problems with drugs and  
such issues formed a sharp distinction between city and  
neighborhoods may not be as culturally diverse as cities  
with urban culture, particularly through hip-hop music.  
a sense of familiarity with some elements of urban life.  
segregation are still prevalent in American cities, suburbs  
distinguished by race as they once were. Changes in pop  
film. No matter what images they create, Hollywood never  
For Hollywood blockbuster films, it has been difficult  
city life. However, there has been a marked change in  
cities and race in the 1990s and the year 2000.

It is important to reflect on such films and what they  
of American culture. What does this trend in film mean  
Bronx? As the economy turns downward again, will cities  
be demonized once again? Do Americans have a different  
How will film media react to new developments in the  
effect of September 11's tragedy have on urban areas and

media? Looking closely at films about the South Bronx  
between media and reality. History and cultural attitudes  
Yet Hollywood's exaggerated depictions may overshadow  
present and affect mindsets for years to come. The new



present and affect millions for years to come. The film is revealing in both the future for the South Bronx and how to depict urban areas.

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#### NOTES

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Ricans.  
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21 Pocock and Hudson, 101-108. See also Davis, 23, 224  
myths create a panic, which in turn influence public poli  
22 Grogan and Proscio, 155-157. The “broken window”  
adopted by mayors such as Rudolph Giuliani in the 1990s  
law enforcement policy.  
23 Davis, 224. Davis gives a thorough description of how  
led to the creation of “Fortress Cities.” Klein, 11, discusse  
similar fashion. And Vergara, 110-119, chronicles this pho  
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FROM ASSIMILATION TO ANNIHILATION: PUERTO RICAN IMAGES IN US FILMS, the complex of aggression, as it may seem paradoxical, essentially represents Erickson hypnosis.

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