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| **Copyright © 1999 Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture All rights reserved.ISSN 1070-8286***Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 6(2) (1999) 46-57**Law Enforcement and Popular Movies:Hollywood as a Teaching Tool in the Classroom**byCharles CrawfordWestern Michigan UniversityHollywood has had a love affair with policing from the first appearance of the Keystone Kops in 1912 to the police dramas of 1997 such as *L.A. Confidential* and *Copland*. Given this focus of Hollywood on policing and the popularity of this genre with the movie-going public, I began to ask three questions of my students and myself. First, has the image of police and their actions changed over time? This question has evolved through discussions in my class about policing and its environmental context. Policing is an open system in that the environment affects the work of its agents. Politics, society, and media reflections of law enforcement all change over time, and policing as a profession is not immune to these changes.During my own undergraduate courses on law enforcement, my instructor would occasionally refer to a particular film or television portrayal of policing and point out what was inaccurate about the actions of the officers. This thought provoking discussion has stayed with me and has led to my second question: What misconceptions of police and their actions does Hollywood portray? This question usually provides a starting point for a discussion of police use of deadly force and corruption among officers.My final question, which might be of some significance to all instructors, asks whether the powerful medium of Hollywood films can be used as a teaching tool in a law enforcement classroom? Personally, I have a serious interest in film and consider myself an avid collector. In addition, I had an interest in law enforcement well before my career as a sociology professor. Because of this background, it was a natural progression to explore the intersection of movies, law enforcement and teaching. As an instructor of a junior level class, "The Sociology of Law Enforcement," I frequently encounter students whose sole basis for understanding criminal procedure, law and policing has been Hollywood films. I felt it was important to try and use this source of misunderstanding as a tool to enlighten and stimulate in-class discussion.Examining how Hollywood's police characters have changed over time is a daunting task given the multitude of films based on a law and order theme. One of the most interesting and in-depth analyses of this issue comes from the [Powers, Rothman and Rothman](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is2/crawford.html#powers) (1996) text entitled *Hollywood's America: Social and Political Themes in Motion Pictures*. Because [Powers](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is2/crawford.html#powers) et al.'s (1996) analysis is one of the few to systematically examine changing trends in motion pictures and policing, the following discussion will borrow heavily from their framework. [Powers](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is2/crawford.html#powers) et al. **[End page 46]** (1996) used a random sample of the ten top grossing box office films for each year between 1946-1990. This sampling method yielded a total of 400 films, which were then divided into three time periods (1946- 1965, 1966-1975 and 1976-1990) for the purpose of analyzing images of crime, victims and police. It should be noted that the original sample was divided into four time periods, in ten-year divisions. However, because there were so few law enforcement characters in the time period from 1946-1955 and 1956- 1965, these periods were collapsed for the authors' discussion of policing. For each time wave the authors examined the major themes and portrayal of characters for movies that featured police officers.During the time period of 1946-1965, the theme for Hollywood's representation of crime, criminals and police was "**crime doesn't pay**." This period in Hollywood was very restrictive for filmmakers due to the Production Code developed by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). The Production Code was adopted industry wide in 1930 as an internal method of censorship that declared what was acceptable in films. If filmmakers ignored the code, their motion pictures would not be shown in MPPDA affiliated theaters across the country and their studios would be heavily fined. The relevance of the Production Code for the images of law enforcement in film was that there were very few surprises, as criminals could not be shown in a sympathetic light nor could they be allowed to escape the "long arm of the law." Specifically the Code stated:General principles . . . Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed nor shall sympathy be created for its violation. . . . Crimes Against the Law . . . These shall never be presented in such a way as to throw sympathy with the crime as against law and justice or to inspire others with a desire for imitation. ([Leff & Simmons](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is2/crawford.html#leff), 1990, p.284)In this time period, law enforcement officers were shown as *men* who enforced the law for moral and ethical reasons. In addition, police officers rarely used violence in films during this time. [Powers](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is2/crawford.html#powers) et al. note that only 1 in 10 police characters resorted to violence (1996, p.107).Although there were several restrictions on the depiction of police and their actions, it was during this period that police dramas began to take a foothold in cinema. Gangster films dominated the 1930's as rags-to-riches stories with a twist for the depression era. The only law enforcement officers depicted in this time period were private detectives or federal agents. When municipal police officers were shown on film, they were typically seen as inept or comic ([Reiner](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is2/crawford.html#reiner), 1978), a stereotype reminiscent of the Keystone Kops from earlier in the century. It was not until the late 1940s that professional and competent municipal police officers began to appear. One of the first films to feature municipal police was Jule Dassin's *Naked City* (1948), in which a professional police officer appeared in the lead role. In addition to this distinction, *Naked City* also **[End page 47]** depicted "realistic" police procedure and began a new genre of films based on procedure which was well received by many real-life cops across the country ([Reiner](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is2/crawford.html#reiner), 1978, p.708). The next wave of law enforcement and popular films, however, was characterized by dramatic changes in the ways which police and criminals could be shown.During the time period of 1966-1975, the theme for popular film portrayals of crime and law enforcement was "**lawlessness and disorder**." The Production Code that restricted films of the previous two decades was removed in 1966 due to heavy criticism and replaced in 1968 with today's familiar ratings of G through X. In addition to the changes in Hollywood, there were changes in society's attitudes towards social and political freedom as well as protection from censorship during the tumultuous 1960's. The major change in the actions of law enforcers in film during this time period was in the use of violence, particularly vigilante style justice like Clint Eastwood's popular film character "Dirty Harry" meted out.Of course, the legal context of the period must be considered as important law enforcement cases were decided by the United States Supreme Court. Cases such as *Mapp v. Ohio* (1961), *Escobedo v. Illinois* (1964) and *Miranda v. Arizona* (1966) were unsettling decisions as many politicians and citizens felt that suspects' rights were being upheld over victims' rights. In addition, Richard Nixon was elected president in 1968 running on a law and order campaign. This shift in movie themes could be explained by the conservative feelings in the country. For the first time movies about law enforcement officers began to focus not just on the crime or the criminals, but also on the home life and internal relations of police work ([Reiner](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is2/crawford.html#reiner), 1978). Due to these major thematic changes, law enforcement officials were being shown for the first time in an unsympathetic light, as in the films *Serpico* (1974) and *Dog Day Afternoon* (1976).The most recent time wave from 1976-1990 could be best described as a "**war on crime**." The portrayal of police officers and their actions was the most fantastic during this era. The serious critiques and dramas of policing from the previous decade shifted to comic-action such as the *Lethal Weapon* (1987) and *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984) series. In this time period, police officers were frequently seen as lovable renegades who were the only people smart enough and courageous enough to save the city or in some cases the entire country. This is a contrast from the previous decade in which police officers were shown as cold malevolent enforcers of the law often working in a sea of corruption in crime-ridden cities. Many times the officers portrayed during this *war on crime* era were not much different then the criminals they faced in that they often thumbed their noses at the rulebooks and took the audience on wild rides, as in the *Diehard* (1988) series starring Bruce Willis. While we are heading into a new century, the themes of the 1976-1990 time period do not seem to be drawing to an end, although the late 1990's has seen the **[End page 48]** occasional serious police drama such as the previously mentioned *L.A. Confidential* and *Copland*.Given the change of themes in Hollywood's portrayal of law enforcement, is it possible to use popular films as a teaching tool in the classroom? Based on much of my class discussion, I came to answer this question in the affirmative. Consequently, I began to look at the major themes in Hollywood's portrayal of police and created one of my favorite lectures and a popular class activity among my students. I believe that all instructors are looking for innovative ways to bring topics to life in the classroom, and I felt that this activity would be unique, creative, informative and fun. This activity would also bring together both my love of film and interest in research and teaching.Throughout my law enforcement course, I discuss many aspects of policing in American society, but the central focus is on critical issues in the police relationship with citizens. I am particularly interested in dispelling myths about the day-to-day activities of policing, especially the use of deadly force, the origins and consequences of police corruption, and finally how police relate to minority citizens. My lecture involving police and movies comes towards the latter half of my course; as a result, my students have had several weeks of reading, lecture, and discussion on the reality of police work. By having this grounded starting point, I feel that my students are better able to assess and critique what are accurate and inaccurate portraits of police on the big screen.Part of my mission in the "Sociology of Law Enforcement" course is to shed light on a career that many of my students would like to choose or have contemplated at some point. Choosing films that represent critical issues like police use of deadly force, police corruption and police relations with minority citizens, I use this lecture to help my students gain a clearer picture of policing in our society and how it is depicted in popular culture. My choice of films was simply based upon my own knowledge of recent motion pictures involving the police during the last five to 10 years. For much of the movie- going public, myself included, there are certain scenes from Hollywood films that stay with us long after the movie has ended. With this in mind, I began asking myself which of these scenes best illustrate the points I am trying to make in class. I poured over my personal movie library and began to assemble a video compilation that would both represent my points from lecture and challenge my students.Most of the scenes I use are quite graphic so I give my students a prior warning that the film clips we will be viewing are from movies rated R and NC-17. Furthermore, if anyone finds the material objectionable, I do not force him or her to watch the presentation, and he or she is free to leave without penalty. As I start my video lecture, I inform the students which issue the clip represents and what they should be taking notice of in each scene. After viewing each segment, I pause the tape and review that **[End page 49]** particular scene, discussing how it connects to the assigned text, lectures, and in-class discussion of these subjects. Typically, I proceed in the following manner.Police Action and Deadly ForceWithout question, Hollywood loves the action that can be found in policing. Police action lends itself well to the special effects of gunfire and the danger of a high-speed chase. These police action sequences have created some of the most memorable scenes in Hollywood history. There were numerous films to draw from for my class presentation, but for this category I chose *Heat*, *Hard-Boiled*, and *Bad Boys*.The movie *Heat* (1995), directed by Michael Mann, stars Al Pacino (Vincent Hanna) as an egotistical hard-edged police officer and Robert De Niro (Neil McCauley) as a criminal mastermind. The scene I chose is the shootout between the police and Neil McCauley's gang as they attempt to flee from a well organized bank robbery. This scene illustrates Hollywood and moviegoers' love of violence and gunplay. But is this an accurate picture of police actions? The answer is both yes and no. The gun battle takes place between heavily armed criminals and detectives working with Pacino's character. The key players use fully automatic weapons and wear body armor. A rather interesting point that my students did not notice in this movie is that only the detectives have equal firepower to the "bad" guys. The uniformed patrol officers only have their pistols and no apparent body armor. This scene perpetuates the myth that detectives and their work are more important than officers on patrol.During my discussions of this scene years ago, I would dismiss this violent exchange of gunfire as mere movie magic, as the special effects wizards loading customized guns with ammunition that had three times the normal amount of gun powder so that a fantastic burst of fire would result. Then the bank robbery and well televised shoot-out in Los Angeles occurred between the L.A.P.D. and two heavily armed criminals. It was as though movies became reality as the public watched news reports and subsequent analyses of the shootout. *Heat* offers a terrific action packed scene involving complex characters; nonetheless, this movie presents a distorted view of police actions involving deadly force. The reality of police work is that the majority of police officers can expect to work their entire careers without ever firing their weapons in the line of duty. For my students who expect that a career in policing holds everyday excitement like this scene from *Heat*, I must remind them that:"Police in all cities kill rarely, but at widely varying rates. The average Jacksonville police officer would have to work 139 years before killing anyone. In New York City, the wait would be 694 years. It would be 1,299 years in Milwaukee and 7,692 years in Honolulu, all based on the 1980-84 rates of killing" ([Sherman](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is2/crawford.html#sherman), et al., 1986, p.1). **[End page 50]**The next film I use in the police action and deadly force category is *Hard-Boiled* (1992) by well- known Hong Kong director John Woo. *Hard-Boiled* stars Woo's favorite leading man, Chow Yun-Fat, as inspector Yuen, nicknamed "Tequila". The scene I chose for my class is in the opening 15 minutes of the film where "Tequila" and his partner do battle with gun smugglers in a restaurant. This is perhaps one of the most violent sequences in a police drama in recent years. As the gun battle ensues, numerous innocent bystanders are killed in the crossfire as "Tequila" chases after a menacing criminal. In true Woo style, the violence is glorified and choreographed like a ballet, with slow-motion shots, stills and blood splatters galore. Woo is truly in top form in his genre, and the opening moments of this movie are equal to many of the climaxes in American action films.This film is a particularly interesting look at police actions since it is from a Chinese director who admits he knows very little about guns (but loves them nonetheless) and is aware that his movies will ultimately come to the United States. Is this typical of police actions in Hong Kong? Or does he feel that this is what American-style policing is like and that this is what we expect of our police officers on film? *Hard-Boiled* is a very entertaining film and raises some interesting cultural questions about films, directors and audiences. But once again, criminal justice students see a very distorted image of policing in an international arena.The last film I chose for this category is *Bad Boys* (1995), by director Michael Bay and starring Martin Lawrence (Marcus Burnett) and Will Smith (Mike Lowery). The two characters are Miami's best narcotics detectives. When $100 million worth of heroin is stolen from their department's evidence vault, this odd couple is put on the case. This film offers a mixture of comedy, sex, drama and action in the typical buddy style cop film exemplified by *Lethal Weapon* and *48 Hours*. Lawrence and Smith's characters take Tea Leoni's character (Julie Mott) into protective custody after she witnesses the death of a friend at the hands of a fierce gang led by the proverbial bad guy Tcheky Karyo (Fouchet). The scene I show my class is when Fouchet finds where Julie Mott is being hidden and our detectives must go into action.A fantastic chase ensues as the gang, with Julie in tow, races through the streets of Miami, crashing through businesses, tumbling wheelchair bound citizens, and carjacking innocent bystanders. Action without a doubt, but as Mike Lowery is in hot pursuit, he follows the trail of broken doors and glass, adding a touch of humor and levity as he barrels through a beauty salon and a swimsuit model photo shoot. The action scenes are dramatic and well-done, with a slow- motion shot of Mike Lowery diving into the street to save his partner, Marcus Burnett, from being rundown by the fleeing thugs who have stolen a car by killing the driver. *Bad Boys* is humorous due to the interplay of Lawrence and Smith. However, as with the movie **[End page 51]** *Heat*, the audience is given a strange image of detective work and the use of force.Popular film and television have frequently been criticized for overemphasizing detective work, giving the perception that police investigators are highly effective crime fighters with specialized knowledge and cunning that permit them to solve crimes that ordinary men and women could not ([LaGrange](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is2/crawford.html#lagrange), 1993, p.292). The [Rand Corporation](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is2/crawford.html#rand) conducted the first detailed analysis of detective work in 1975. Through a mail survey of 150 police departments, the researchers found that much of detective work was superficial and nonproductive. As [Carl Klockars](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is2/crawford.html#klockars) points out: "All but about 5% of serious crimes that are solved by detectives are solved because a patrol officer has caught the perpetrator at the scene, because a witness tells the detective whodunit or through routine clerical procedures" (1985, p.86). This does not mean that the police detective's role is unimportant in a department, but *Bad Boys* merely illustrates the point of how far removed from reality film depictions of detectives and their work can be.Police CorruptionPolice corruption is perhaps one of the oldest and most persistent problems in policing and has provided fertile ground for Hollywood movies. This is the one category of Hollywood films on policing that may offer a frightening reflection of reality rather than a distortion of police misconduct. There are serious reminders of how far and fantastic police corruption may be in real life. Few can forget the beating of Rodney King, the recent torture of a Haitian suspect in a New York City police precinct and the wild tales of corruption that have come out of the New Orleans Police Department. For this category I have picked three films: *Internal Affairs*, *Q&A* and *A Man in Uniform*. Although there are many forms of police misconduct and corrupt actions, each of these films involves what is arguably the most frightening and damaging form of corruption an officer can engage in - the unlawful killing of a citizen. Because of their similar theme, I will describe the film scenes first and then discuss their relevance.*Internal Affairs* (1990), directed by Mike Figgis, stars Richard Gere as Dennis Peck, a star cop in one of the ritzier precincts of Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley. During the film the audience discovers that Peck is also a master criminal, running a vast empire and laundering money through several ex-wives. Andy Garcia co-stars as Sgt. Raymond Avila, an internal affairs investigator assigned to unravel Peck's organization. The scene I use takes place during the opening credits as Dennis Peck, along with several other uniformed officers, conducts a midnight raid to rob unsuspecting drug dealers. As Peck and the other officers are inside, one officer remaining outside sees a suspect fleeing the house; he shouts "freeze," the suspect turns and the officer fires, killing him. The act of corruption comes as Dennis Peck, emerging to see what has happened, turns over the dead suspect and announces that there is no weapon. The officer **[End page 52]** involved in the shooting begins to panic, but Dennis Peck has a solution. He takes a knife from his sock and places it in the dead suspect's hand. The shooting officer protests at first, but Dennis Peck assures him this happens to every cop and that everything will be alright.Chilling to say the least, *Q&A* (1990) is directed by Sidney Lumet, who has dealt with the subject of police corruption in two classic Hollywood films, *Serpico* (1974) and *Prince of the City* (1981). *Q&A* stars Nick Nolte as Lt. Mike Brennan, one of N.Y.P.D.'s finest detectives, and Timothy Hutton as cop turned assistant District Attorney, Al Reilly. The scene I chose is in the opening moments of the film when Lt. Brennan kills an unarmed Latino drug dealer in cold blood outside of a nightclub. He then pulls two bystanders from the club and forces them to agree they saw a gun in the dead suspect's hand. Lt. Brennan later claims he shot the suspect in self- defense as other officers arrived at the scene, thus calling for an internal affairs investigation or a "Q&A" about the incident. As the film progresses, the viewer learns that Lt. Brennan is perhaps the most corrupt and terrifying officer in the whole of New York City.The last film I chose to use in this category is *A Man in Uniform* (1993), directed by David Wellington and starring Tom McCamus (Henry Adler) as a struggling actor who lands a part portraying a police officer on a fictional television program. Henry Adler becomes fixated on the uniform and life of a beat officer. He begins to immerse himself into his work, first wearing his police uniform off the set and then buying a police scanner and thrusting himself into action on the street. One night while "on patrol," he comes across a cop in a compromising position with a prostitute in his patrol car. The cop's partner, Kevin Tighe (Frank), takes Adler next door for coffee and regales him with stories from the trenches.The scene I chose from this dark film is when Adler's new "partner," Frank, takes him along to shakedown a Vietnamese drug dealer. This scene is interesting on many levels as Frank, an older officer, hurls racial epithets at the Vietnamese suspect and strikes him. Adler asks if he should read the suspect his rights, and Frank informs him that *this* suspect has no rights. When the Vietnamese suspect threatens Frank, Frank pulls an unmarked pistol from an ankle holster and forces the suspect to take it, yelling to Adler to "watch out, he has a gun". When their victim proves uncooperative, Adler shoots him to death.These scenes are quite graphic and disturbing, but they offer a chance to assess real life corruption in policing. Although this type of corruption is the most serious, it is very rare. Nonetheless, when it does happen in real life, the results are devastating for police departments and terrifying for citizens. The city and police department of New Orleans has had more than its share of legendary forms of corruption, but there was a jolt in 1994 when a FBI sting resulted in the indictment of 10 police officers. Undercover agents made contact with Officer Len Davis, nicknamed **[End page 53]** the "Robocop," to set up police protection for a warehouse containing 130 kilos of cocaine during officers' off-duty hours. Davis offered to provide as many as 29 police officers who were willing to guard in uniform. The FBI recorded Davis planning to murder the undercover federal agents and steal the cocaine, as well as arranging to have a woman murdered who had filed a police brutality complaint against him. The citizens of New Orleans felt there could not be an act of corruption that could outweigh the severity of Len Davis, but in 1995 officer Antoinette Frank entered a Vietnamese restaurant in eastern New Orleans to commit an armed robbery. She killed security guard Ronald Williams, her former police partner who was moonlighting. She then executed the son and daughter of the restaurant's immigrant owners, with the girl kneeling in prayer when she was killed. Frank fled with an accomplice. Unbelievably, she returned later in a patrol car in response to the emergency calls on her police radio. What she did not know was that a third sibling, hiding in a walk-in refrigerator, had witnessed the murders and identified Frank as the killer.This type of corruption can destroy the credibility of the police and tarnish all police officers. Unfortunately, Hollywood has many real life examples to imitate in films. It is difficult to tell students that these things are rare when they are bombarded with fantastic tales in the news and in the theater. Recently, I was conducting a lecture on police use of deadly force when a student interjected: "Well, all police officers carry those throwaway guns so that if they make a mistake and shoot an innocent victim they can place it in their hand." The comment was met with agreeing nods from many of the other students. This is one of the reasons that popular films can be used as a teaching tool; they illustrate the problems of policing with a graphic display and allow a discussion based on grounded theory about realistic police practices to proceed.Minorities and the PoliceThe conflict between people of color and the police in the United States has a long and painful history. As [Coramae Richey Mann](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is2/crawford.html#mann)(1993) notes: "Since the early days of this nation, peoples of color have complained of differential, primarily disrespectful and brutal treatment by the police, particularly white police officers" (p. 133). Unfortunately, minority voices have often been ignored on this topic. But there has been a change in the face of motion pictures in this country, as [Powers, Rothman and Rothman](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is2/crawford.html#powers) (1996) point out, such that since the mid-1960's Hollywood movies have begun to include more and more minorities as characters (p. 175).This shift has been accompanied by the relinquishing of control over movie production and story lines to the hands of minority directors. Many of them, such as multitalented directors Spike Lee, Rusty Cundieff and the Hughes brothers, have turned their cameras to what they see as a serious problem with the relationship between minority communities and **[End page 54]** the police. The two movies I chose for this category are *Tales from the Hood*, and *Boyz N The Hood*.*Tales from the Hood* (1995) by African-American writer, director and actor Rusty Cundieff is an homage to anthology horror movies with a twist - all the stories concern African-Americans. The vignette that I use in class is entitled "Rogue Cop Revelation." In "Rogue Cop Revelation," Anthony Griffith portrays a black rookie named Clarence. Clarence is torn between loyalty to the police force and loyalty to his race when he finds himself in the midst of three corrupt white cops, led by brutal Officer Strom (Wings Hauser). Strom and the other officers beat black community leader Martin Moorehouse (Tom Wright) during a trumped up traffic stop. As Clarence tries to stop the beating, he is told to get into the car. He tells his partner they should report the other officers, but his partner, who also participated in the beating, tells him that cops never break the "code" of silence. The officers then make Moorhouse's death look like a car accident brought about by a drug overdose. Clarence watches, horrified, but fails to breach the blue wall of silence. This scene illustrates both the problems with police corruption and the mistreatment of minorities, which goes back to the subculture of policing arguments made by [William Westly](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is2/crawford.html#westley) (1953). Westly argued that the police have a subculture that is defined by two norms - secrecy and violence. Cundieff's film is somewhat exaggerated but makes a valid social comment on what is a serious problem in some police departments and many minority communities.The last film I use is *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), directed by John Singleton and starring Cuba Gooding, Jr. (Tre), Lawrence Fishburn (Furious) and Ice Cube (Doughboy). *Boyz N the Hood* is a morality drama and Singleton's debut film about the life and times of four young men growing up in a violent south central Los Angeles neighborhood. The scene I chose shows Tre and his friend Ricky, portrayed by Morris Chestnut, driving back from a gathering that was disrupted by gunfire when they are pulled over by the police.This is an interesting scene because the two young men are African-American and one of the officers is also African-American. The African-American officer takes offense to Tre's responses to his questions and asks him: "You think you tough"? The officer accuses Tre of being in a gang and places his weapon at Tre's head, telling him he could "blow his head clean off" and there is nothing he could do about it. Tre begins to cry while Ricky stands by and watches in terror in what becomes a very emotional and tense scene. The officers then hear on their radio that a car has been spotted matching the description given for the car driven by two young men who were involved in an earlier shooting. The officer merely tells the boys to have a good night after torturing and terrifying them. This is an example of intra- racial police abuse. [Albert Reiss](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is2/crawford.html#reiss) (1968) suggested that minority officers are more aggressive with members of their own race. He found that 71 percent of those victimized by African-American officers were African-Americans themselves. This scene helps to illustrate this fact and can be used to teach students **[End page 55]** that not every act of police abuse is between white officers and minority suspects.These scenes are painful to watch as we are all aware of the racial tension that has existed between minorities and the police since the earliest days of law enforcement in this country - from the slave patrols of the old south to the patrol car today. It would be easy to dismiss these examples of minority abuse by police as Hollywood exaggeration. To provide what I consider a *reality check*, however, I often change tapes and show part of the Rodney King beating. I must remind my students that these things do in fact happen and that there were many citizens who felt that the King beating was unique only because it was captured on videotape. These scenes are admittedly hard to watch and are very emotional, but the lessons learned are immeasurable.ConclusionAfter we have watched the film clips from the lecture, I move into a discussion period where I ask the students to draw connections between what we just watched and the reality of police work. It is hard to measure people's changes in perception, but in the weeks subsequent to this lecture, I have had numerous students come to me and share what they have learned through our discussion. Many say they now look at film depictions of police officers a little closer and are able to pick out what is wrong with these renditions or in some cases what appears to be an accurate portrayal of law enforcement actions.Hollywood can offer the movie-going public pure magic and entertainment that has created social and political statements as well as impacted popular culture. These facts are certainly relevant for the portrayal of the police and their actions. Nonetheless, we must take the portrayals of police on the screen with a grain of salt. Many times the images are improbable and fantastic, but does this mean that these images should be ignored? The answer is a resounding no. As [Powers](http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol6is2/crawford.html#powers) et al. (1996) illustrate in their text, these images, no matter how far removed from the reality of police work, still reflect their times and the trends in politics, law and society.Much of the entertainment in film comes from the fact that reality is distorted, the imagination is stretched and we suspend our disbelief, if only for a moment. But there is something much more interesting going on in the ways in which film distorts the reality of policing. Given the history of Hollywood's view of America, these distortions are not random; rather, filmmakers, script writers, producers and studios are well aware of their environment and are affected by social influences and events, particularly those that revolve around law and order.Citizens may be reluctant to admit the impact that motion pictures and television have on their view of the world, particularly when it comes to a low visibility occupation like policing, but films can be **[End page 56]** highly influential and reflective of our society. Many citizens, my new students particularly, hold many preconceived notions about the nature and operations of law enforcement in our society. I take what I consider to be the source of many of these stereotypes and use it as a method of illustration and education. Through the use of film in the classroom, I am able to point out where many of these misconceptions of police work originate, why they continue and in what context these images come about. In the process of accomplishing my goals, I feel that I create an enjoyable classroom experience for teacher and student as well as demonstrate the intersection of criminal justice and popular culture.**REFERENCES**Klockars, C. (1985). *The idea of the police*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.LaGrange, R. (1993). *Policing American society*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall Inc.Leff, L. & Simmons, J. (1990). *The dame in the kimono: Hollywood, censorship and the Production Code from the 1920's to the 1960's*. London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson.Mann, C. R. (1993). *Unequal justice: A question of color*. Bloomington, IN: University Press.Powers, S., Rothman, D. & Rothman, S. (1996). *Hollywood's America: Social and political themes in motion pictures*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.Rand Corporation. 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