

The Lasting Relevance of "Set it Off"

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I was only nine when *Set It Off* was released in November 1996. I had no clue what the film was about, but I wanted to see it because my older cousins, whom I idolized, saw the film as soon as it came out and played the soundtrack on repeat. My parents refused to let me see it because of the violence--and possibly Queen Latifah's depiction of a lesbian character--so I spent the holidays memorizing the soundtrack with my cousins until some new film grabbed my attention and I moved on.

Though it's now considered a classic of black cinema, I only saw *Set it Off* for the first time this week. I expected to find it dated but was shocked to find it still painfully relevant.

Set in the Los Angeles projects, *Set It Off* tells the story of four black women trapped in a world with no respect for their intersectional identities. Cleo, played by Queen Latifah, is a masculine-of-center queer woman looking to fix up her ride, pay off her bills, and spoil her girlfriend. Stony, portrayed by Jada Pinkett Smith, longs to escape the projects and grieves the murder of her college-bound brother at the hands of the police. Frankie, Vivica A. Fox's character, loses her job after being accused of conspiring in a bank robbery she had no part in. And Tisean, played by Kimberly Elise, is a single mother struggling to prove her financial

ability to care for her son. Fed up with their daily realities and the lack of options afforded to them, the women decide to begin robbing banks to procure the money they know can change their lives.

Cleverly, the robberies function as a metaphor to explore divisions of class, gender, race, and sexuality. The banks symbolize all of the societal ideals the film's heroines do not possess: whiteness, maleness, wealth, and heterosexuality. When a white detective questions Frankie in the opening of the film, he asks her, "What's the procedure when you're being robbed?" This question not only refers to her training as a bank teller but extends to her ability to behave obediently in a society where, no matter how hard she works, she remains at the bottom of the totem pole. Her response that a gun to her head caused her to change course foreshadows the remainder of the film, where we watch the four heroines abandon societal procedure under the unyielding stress of their everyday lives.

The main characters are obviously upset with the status quo but never come off as stereotypical "angry black women." Their anger and decisions are justified in a way that is uncommonly portrayed in mainstream cinema. It is society and their place within it that causes anger, but when together, the women tend to relax and we see them express joy.

To that end, the women are unwaveringly loyal to one another. As they approach their final target, Stony must decide whether to maintain her relationship with Keith, a black Harvard-educated bank manager or to stick with her crew and finish out their string of robberies. She chooses her friends because she knows, as they all do, that no man can save them.

Throughout the film we see men betray, accuse, and coerce the heroines. Violence against black women is frighteningly common but rarely discussed or reported upon and almost never witnessed. For every name we can offer of an unarmed black man executed by police there is a name we don't know of a woman who died the same way. Black Lives Matter was created by three black women, two of whom are queer, and somehow these facts get left out in the majority of discussions surrounding the movement. Black women, especially queer black women, continue to struggle to have their needs met, their obstacles addressed, and their stories heard.

Unsurprisingly, our protagonists' best moments tend to be those where no men are present. Their relationships with men are not a deciding factor in how these women live their lives and the ability to make their own choices as they embark on their crime spree affords them a sense of freedom.

Much of the heist planning takes place in Cleo's garage and, though the women keep their traditionally feminine job of cleaning houses for a cover as their crime careers take off, in the garage, they engage in activities typically reserved for men. Where the traditional

mainstream heist movie would show men in the safe house after a job counting money, *Set It Off* depicts our heroines celebrating their haul on the hood of a classic low-rider in the home of an out black lesbian. Everything about the scene is revolutionary.

Cleo's sexuality is never in question nor is it treated as anything other than normal. Cleo occupies a position typically reserved for men in 90s West Coast hip-hop culture. She procures guns, robs banks, showers her beautiful femme girlfriend with gifts, and smokes weed with her friends. At one point, Frankie, Stony, and Tisean show up at Cleo's auto shop unannounced to talk business and find her receiving a lap dance from her girlfriend. The camera lingers on the dance and it's clear that this dance doesn't exist for male pleasure. In fact, it exists in a bubble completely devoid of men altogether.

When the film came out it received praise for its empathy towards the heroines, the social commentary embedded in the plot, and the stark reality of its characters' lives. Though other heist films and tv shows have come up since then, few manage to question and comment on societal norms in the way that *Set It Off* does. 2018's *Oceans 8* boasted a diverse cast but kept the story superficial. *Good Girls*, an NBC sitcom, occasionally flirts with social commentary but keeps the tone appealingly light.

Compare that to the first half hour of *Set It Off*, which sees Stony's little brother, Stevie, killed after the cops mistake a bottle of champagne for a gun. The camera never wavers as the audience watches bullets pierce Stevie's unarmed body. It's a common story in 2018, but in 1996--before Instagram and youtube enabled people of color to share and witness proof of state violence freely--this scene was validating and shocking.

In the
most

Set It Off

Starring Jada Pinkett, Queen
Latifah, Vivica A. Fox, Kimberly
Elise, John C. McGinley



memorable line of the film, Frankie confronts the detective who's suspicions cost her her job and asks him, "What's the procedure when you have a gun to your fucking head?" In a moment of silence, as the detective is forced to understand that this is all about more than robbing banks, Director F. Gary Gray asks the audience a larger question: when society has a gun to your head, what's the procedure? When forced to decide between maintaining the status quo and living miserably or risking death and living freely what do you do?

It's a question that's confronted black Americans since our arrival in this country and one that we continue to ask ourselves. What is the procedure? The film gives no definitive answer, providing only one set of options to consider, and leaves each viewer to decide their own path.

Watch Set It Off on Amazon today!