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Portrayal of the African-American Community in Netflix's Movie Beats (Chris Robinson, 2019)

تصوير المجتمع الأفريقي الأمريكي في فيلم نتفليكس "إيقاعات" (كريس روبنسون، 2019)

Khaled Chouana^{1,*}

¹ MCB Abbes Laghrour University of Khenchela, Algeria.

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Abstract

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The article is primarily concerned with examining the cinematic representation of the African-American community of Chicago in Netflix's movie Beats which was directed by Chris Robinson in 2019. The aim of the study is to investigate the different strategies adopted by the film director to depict daily life of African-Americans who are located in the difficult neighborhoods of South Side Chicago and who try to make a living. In this descriptive research, a film analysis which explores cinematography, sound, mise-en-scène and acting was carried out. Also careful consideration was given to the reception of Beats by using reception theory which is generally referred to as audience reception in the analysis of visual data. The study relied on reviews of several film critics and opinions of 212 internet users who watched the movie. I argue that Beats captures the psychic realities of young Chicagoans who face the traumatic impacts of violence. Similarly, I suggest that the movie offers a tribute to the City of Chicago and its culture.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ملخص

شيكاغو

الأفارقة الأمريكيين

التصوير السينمائي

نتفليكس.

يتطرق هذا المقال الى تفحص التصوير السينمائي للمواطنين الأفارقة الأمريكيين القاطنين بمدينة شيكاغو وهذا في فيلم كريس روبنسون «إيقاعات» الذي تم اصداره عبر شركة البث الحي نتفليكس في سنة 2019. الهدف من البحث هو الكشف عن مختلف الاستراتيجيات السينمائية التي اعتمدها مخرج الفيلم لتصوير الحياة اليومية للأفارقة الأمريكيين الذين يعيشون في الأحياء الصعبة للناحية الجنوبية لمدينة شيكاغو والذين يكافحون من أجل المعيشة. للإجابة على اشكالية هذه الدراسة الوصفية، فقد تم تحليل الفيلم مع اعطاء أهمية للتصوير السينمائي، الصوت، الاخراج وأداء الممثلين. أيضا فقد تم تحليل استقبال الفيلم باستخدام نظرية التلقي التي تهتم بتحليل المعطيات البصرية المتلقاة من طرف الجماهير. أعطت الدراسة أهمية لمقالات عدة نقاد سينمائيين بالإضافة الى 212 مشاهداً من مستخدمي الإنترنت الذين أدلوا بأرائهم بعد مشاهدة الفيلم. أخيراً ستوضح هذه الدراسة بأن فيلم «إيقاعات» قادر على تصوير الآثار النفسية للعنف الذي يعاني منه شباب شيكاغو. بالإضافة الى ذلك، فإن هذا العمل السينمائي يساهم في الاحتفال بمدينة شيكاغو وثقافتها.

1. Introduction

In the final scene of Chris Robinson's coming-of-age-drama film *Beats* (2019) Romelo Reese (Anthony Anderson) comforts the young August Monroe (Khalil Everage) who blames himself for the death of his sister Kari (Megan Sousa) and for being a burden on his mother (Uzo Aduba). Romelo hugs August and tells him: "This is Chicago, August, and it ain't on you to change that shit". This emotional ending scene deserves particular attention. Why does Romelo say: "this is Chicago" and why does he use the phrase "that shit"? The present article will deconstruct the comments of Romelo and explore the way in which Chicago is depicted in *Beats*. Specifically, my aim will be to investigate the strategies adopted by the film director to portray the daily life of African-Americans who live in the neighborhoods of South Side Chicago.

Beats was released in the United States on June 19, 2019. Its film director was able to deal with a sensitive social issue in a subtle way, thus allowing viewers to share a filmic experience that unveils the truth about the unpleasant details of South Side Chicago. In addition, unlike the other fictional works about Chicago which were released in movie theatres, *Beats* was released on the media service provider Netflix and therefore it will be interesting to examine the viewing experience in the digital age.

How does Chris Robinson's film portray the life of people in the ghettos of South Side Chicago? How does it celebrate the beauty of Chicago? What about the reception of the movie and did it receive positive reviews?

To answer the above questions, a film analysis which seeks to analyze the storyline, cultural context, characterization, cinematography, and sound of the motion picture was carried out. Also, the research determined the presence of certain words, phrases, and grammatical structures in the movie script that consists of exactly 12,444 words. The reception of *Beats* was analyzed by relying on a number of reports written by film critics and also by examining the opinions of 212 internet users who shared their views after watching the film.

Film analysis is concerned with examining the visual

and textual content of a movie. It must be mentioned that the state of the art reveals that there is "no correct, universal way to write film analysis" (Aumont & Marie, 1988, p29). It means that currently, there is no direct method of interpretation for visual data and therefore film analysis gives room for the inclusion of relevant interpretations about the film that is being examined. Put simply, this article analyzes the movie *Beats* by providing an interpretation of its different components.

After presenting a short overview of Chicago and a summary of *Beats*, the study focuses on the two main strategies adopted by the film director to portray the daily life of African-Americans. First, it is suggested that the film director describes violence as it is in the ghettos and explores its devastating impacts on teenagers. Then, *Beats* celebrates the beauty of the Windy City (AKA Chicago) by integrating its African-American culture and lifestyle. The way people watch movies using streaming platforms is discussed in the end of this article.

2. A Brief Overview of African-Americans of Chicago

The history of African-Americans in Chicago starts with the creation of the city in the 1780s by Jean Baptiste Point du Sable. He is the first known non-indigenous settler of what the French explorer Robert de LaSalle would describe as Checagou in 1679. Du Sable was of African descent and moved to Chicago to set a fur trading post. He is often regarded as the founder of Chicago.

From Du Sable's time to the 1840s, there were African-Americans who tried to survive in the area. They consisted mainly of fugitive slaves and freedmen who established Chicago's first African-American community. The African-American population increased from 77 in 1837 to 955 in 1860. Then, it rose from 3,691 in 1870 to 14,852 in 1890 (Reed, 2005, p.230).

The Great Migration (1910-1970) caused the movement of almost six and a half million African-Americans who migrated from the rural South to the urban states of the Northeast, Midwest, and West (Lemann, 1992, p.6). This huge migration is compared

to a second emancipation since the African-American populations fled lynching, racial segregation, and disenfranchisement in the racist South (Sernett, 1997, p.3). They also wanted to improve their poor economic conditions and find jobs to feed their families. As a result, the cities of Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, and New York City had some of the biggest population increases in the twentieth century.

The great majority of African-Americans of Chicago settled on the West Side. They also settled in the Black Belt on the city's South Side where the steel and meatpacking industries offered working-class jobs. However, many whites denied African-Americans equal opportunities. This resulted in a violent racial conflict known as the Chicago race riot of 1919. It began on the South Side of Chicago on July 27, and ended on August 3 causing the death of twenty-three African-Americans and fifteen white Americans with an additional 537 injured (Encyclopedia of Chicago, 2005).

The African-American people of Chicago also faced some of the same discrimination they had in the South when they were denied equal access to housing. It is true that the US Supreme Court ruled in 1948 that racially restrictive covenants were unconstitutional, but homeowners' associations and real estate operators discouraged members from selling to African-American families, thus maintaining housing segregation. African-Americans families had to wait for whites to move out of the city to new apartments to occupy their older houses.

The neighborhoods were overcrowded and African-American families lived in poor condition houses. Besides, the industrial restructuring of the 1950's and later led to massive job losses. As a consequence, a significant number of African-American families living in unhealthy neighborhoods became poor and asked for welfare assistance from the government. Also, rates of violence became high in South Side Chicago as people faced economic deprivation. This led African-American middle-class families to move to the suburbs of Long Grove, Winnetka, and Northbrook that are located in the north of Chicago.

Even today, many people who live in South Side

Chicago find themselves trapped in segregated ghettos. Semuels (2018) indicates that "people at the bottom are struggling as much as they always have, if not more". She asks why large swaths of Chicago's population are unable to get ahead. She contends there are two main reasons: "the legacy of segregation that made it difficult for poor black families to gain access to the economic activity in other parts of the city, and the disappearance of industrial jobs in factories, steel plants, and logistic companies" (Semuels, 2018).

In addition to segregation and lack of jobs, the African-American community of Chicago suffers from gun violence in the neighborhoods. It is noteworthy that on the weekend of July 4th, 2015, American Independence Day, the city witnessed the shooting of fifty-five people who were wounded (Nikkeas, 2015). Ten of the victims were murdered, including seven-year-old Amari Brown who was shot in the chest as he watched fireworks.

Numerous fictional and non-fictional films set in the present day portray the gun violence that plagued the African-American neighborhoods of Chicago. Steve James's documentary film *The Interrupters* (2011), tells narrative of three violence interrupters who try to protect the blocks of Englewood, one of the main communities of Chicago's South Side. Similarly, the American comedy film *Barbershop: The Next Cut* (2016) directed by Malcolm D. Lee is about Calvin (Ice Cube) who runs a barbershop business in Chicago and organizes with his co-workers a forum with the community to set up a ceasefire in an attempt to decrease violence and save the block. Another fictional work that deserves to be mentioned is Spike Lee's *Chi-Raq* (2015), a musical crime comedy drama film which depicts the never ending cycle of gang violence that has affected entire communities of Chicago's South Side. As for the coming-of-age series *The Chi* (2018) created by Lena Waithe, it is centered on a group of residents on the South Side Chicago who live in a tough neighborhood.

Last but not least, the Netflix's film *Beats* follows the life of August Monroe, a teenage musical prodigy who lives with his mother and his sister Kari in Roseland, a community located on the far South Side

of the City of Chicago. Kari is sent by her mother out to fetch her brother for dinner. Both children are shot and Kari dies. As a result, August develops post-traumatic stress disorder which isolates him from the outside world. The school principal, Vanessa (Emayatzy Corinealdi), sends her estranged husband Romelo, whom she hired as a school security guard to encourage August to come back to class. Romelo who used to be a music manager hears the music of August and secretly befriends the boy. The two characters start working on the music together and Romelo sees the teenager as a way to return to the hip-hop music scene. By the end of the film, Romelo confesses to August that he has manipulated him as he had previously with his another protégé Tony Bigs. However, this time, he promises, they can do things the right way. Life returns to normal as August comes back to school where he is welcomed by the school principal Vanessa and his girlfriend Niyah.

It must be added that the films and the series mentioned above try to show life in the neighborhoods of Chicago; however, they should be considered as an artistic vision and a genre representation. When it comes to gun violence, reality is unsurprisingly, more complex than what a cinematic work would portray. In fact, Hagedorn and Rauch investigated the way institutionalized gangs and public housing policy interacted in Chicago to influence the specific pattern of Chicago's homicides over the past two decades. Their study "Housing, Gangs, and Homicide: What We Can Learn from Chicago" (2007) concluded that:

The presence of gangs that have institutionalized and have a symbiotic relationship with the community in which they exist cannot easily be eliminated through criminal justice measures. Rather, attempts to destroy gangs that have institutionalized in this way may in fact have the opposite of the desired effect and lead to increased violence. Similarly, the housing policies implemented in Chicago had serious consequences for the city's homicide rate when they forced the displacement of the communities in which the gangs had institutionalized. (p.446)

So there is a discrepancy between sociological and scientific analyses of the situation in Chicago and the

way violence is depicted in movies and series.

3. Violence as a Way of Life

Chris Robinson's *Beats* is primarily concerned with depicting youth violence in the neighborhoods of South Side Chicago. This idea is embodied in the opening scene of the movie as August and his friends Laz and Niyah are chased by members of a youth gang after August urinated on a sign of their block. The youngsters are rescued by Vern, the leader of another youth gang who threatens the chasers with a gun.

The chasing scene suggests that the simple fact of hanging out with friends in the blocks of South Side Chicago can be fatal to young people. Kari stresses this idea when she is sent to find her brother for dinner and tells him: "Vern gon' die on the same block he was born on".

Juvenile gangs in the USA are a phenomenon that is part of an underclass marginalized minority subculture. Randall G. Sheldon et al. (2013) suggest that the reasons for deciding to join a youth gang might include "making money, providing entertainment, and guaranteeing protection to members within low-income communities", among many others (p.82). Kids of the ghettos of Chicago's South Side form gangs to better protect their territory as portrayed in *Beats*.

In his study *Crime by Youth Gangs and Groups in the United States*, Walter B. Miller (1992) attributes gang violence to four major motives: "honor, local turf defense, control, and gain" (p.118). August is viewed as a turf-trespasser since he soiled a sacred place that belongs to a juvenile gang. He committed an unacceptable act and as a result he has to pay with his life.

Globally speaking, the study of gang violence needs to focus on the relation between neighborhoods and gangs as suggested by Mares (2009) who notes in his article "Social Disorganization and Gang Homicides in Chicago: A Neighborhood Level Comparison of Disaggregated Homicides" that "gang violence is a group violence and these groups, therefore, need a degree of neighborhood stability and continuity to develop into more cohesive units" (p.9). If there is too

much violence in the neighborhood, members of the gang will leave the group they belong to and look for another geographical place where there is a kind of stability to conduct their criminal activities.

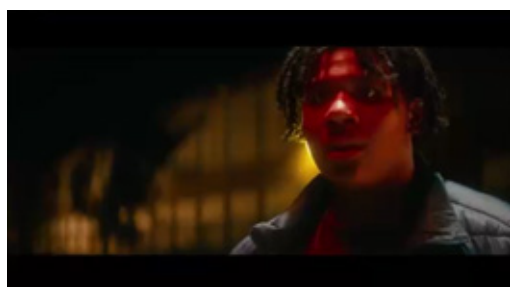
August and Kari live in a relatively stable neighborhood, but as they walk back home they are shot by the leader of the youth gang who was chasing August previously. The close up of August gives viewers a detailed vision of the character's face. It is obvious that August is worried as he saw the leader of the youth gang aiming at him and his sister (See the shots).

Figure 1



© 00:04:48 (Beats, Chris Robinson, 2019)

Figure 2



00:04:49

The zooming of the camera highlights the anxiety as the face of August gets larger in frame. This creates tension and immerses the film viewers in the climactic moment of the shooting. As a consequence, they share some of the same anxiety felt by August. Kari is shot in the head and dies instantly, while August takes the same bullet that killed his sister in the chest. The image of the camera is blurred as it zooms on August who is lying on the ground. He breaths heavily and shouts but the audience cannot hear his cry. Violence is illustrated in the blurred images of August's face

on the ground, all covered with blood (See the shots).

Figure 3



00:04:57

Figure 4



00:04:59

Figure 5



00:05:01

The high angle is used to expose the film viewers to the gratuitous violence that plagued the blocks of Chicago's South Side. The camera looks down at the subjects who lie still and August is finally able to shout the name of his sister Kari.

The shooting scene involves viewers in youth violence of Chicago and it is directly followed by the title sequence. It should be emphasized that it is usual to introduce films with brief scenes prior to the main acts. This is referred to as a cold open, also called a

teaser sequence. The main purpose of the teaser is “to hook the audience into a storyline’s problem or predicament for that storyline’s protagonist” (Duncan, 2006, p. 218). In the pre-credit of *Beats*, Kari has to die and August has to be shot to introduce the topic of youth gang violence.

The cold open of *Beats* can be regarded as a narrative tactic that involves filmgoers in the plot as soon as possible to attract them to the film and make them watch it. Also the cold open informs the filmgoers about the pleasures which will be offered to them in the film.

The title sequence of *Beats* includes black and white pictures of African-American kids playing in a neighborhood, an open casket, a teenager arrested and handcuffed, and a sign that reads “stop killing our kids”. The black and white pictures seem to be depicting real events and consequently they are intended to strengthen the claim that the story is realistic.

The black and white pictures along with the slow tempo of “Womp Womp” (2018) sung by Chicago’s South Side hip-hop singers Valee and Jeremih establish a gloomy atmosphere which informs the film viewers that *Beats* is above all concerned with addressing youth gun violence in Chicago’s black communities.

The movie has an anti-violation message that is conveyed in a subtle way. Robinson films violence in the ghettos of Chicago’s South Side as it is without avoiding any unpleasant details. This idea is stressed in the comments of Forman (2002) who asserts that the block as a space of violence and confrontation is “a zone of indiscriminate aggression where threat and danger are commonplace, even banal” (p.263). In fact, youth violence in Chicago has become a trivial matter as the news report crimes and murders in the ghettos of the city.

The scene of Mrs. Monroe watching TV news highlights the banality of violence in the blocks. However, the film is perhaps presenting a stereotyped and clichéd view of the reality of gun violence in the neighborhoods of Chicago. Films about gun violence in the ghettos are primarily concerned with selling

well and to do so they need to insert a degree of dramatization to involve the film viewers and make them sympathize with the main characters of the film.

Viewers of *Beats* can hear the journalist saying: “Another young life taken, another mother left grieving. Her daughter, just one of fourteen people killed by gun violence on a weekend that saw fifty-four Chicagoans injured by gunfire. And still no answer to the plague of violence that has become, for so many, just another day on TV”.

Chicago can be considered as a dangerous city where violence has become trivial because of its high rates of crimes. Indeed, the data from the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting Program indicate that Illinois, the state where Chicago is located, has the 4th highest number of murders in the USA after California, Florida, and Texas. In 2018, 884 murders were committed in Illinois and 27,357 violent crimes were committed in Chicago, the most populous city of the state.

Violence is a recurring theme in the film and this is embodied in the comments of Mrs. Monroe when she tells Romelo: “he [August] needs to make it to his 18th birthday” or when she says to her son: “You gonna bury me, not the other way around”. The words of Mrs. Monroe assert the idea that turning to eighteen and attending one parent’s funeral is considered as a gift in Chicago’s South Side.

Many American citizens remember the killing of Robert “Yummy” Sandifer in 1994 which generated national attention because of his age. The US news reported that the eleven-year-old boy from Chicago was murdered by his own gang in the Roseland neighborhood of Chicago’s South Side. It is then no coincidence that the film director of *Beats* chose Roseland as the block where August lives as it symbolizes a geographical space of violence in the USA.

Violence affects the daily life of most of the characters that live in Roseland. Mrs. Monroe lost her daughter Kari and also her husband who died because of a heart attack after escaping a shootout in the block. August who developed PTSD lives in isolation whereas his girl friend, Niyah, has lost her two brothers.

When August meets Romelo, the film viewers are told that several teenage rappers were killed in the neighborhoods of Chicago's South Side as they emerged into stardom. "They up a pole on these music cats. They killed Tone while he was getting a sandwich. They shot Bango. Lil' Jeff", August tells Romelo. The shootings of the hip-hop singers in the film remind viewers of the tragic destiny of several African-American artists such as Tupac Shakur (1971-1996), The Notorious B.I.G (1972-1997), Nipsey Hussle (1985-2019), and Huey (1987-2020) who were shot and killed at the moments their musical careers were taking off. Similarly, the short dialogue between Romelo and the young buck (Julian Williams) suggests that violence is omnipresent in the blocks of the community of Chicago.

Romelo: "Young buck, you seen Tony?"

Young buck: "Tony dead".

Romelo: "Dead dead, or not-around-here-no-more dead?"

Young buck: Dead dead, motherfucker. Fucked around and got smoked".

The above dialogue suggests that death is a trivial matter in the black blocks. Also, viewers notice that young buck is cursing as he speaks to Romelo. It is worth saying that swearing is ubiquitous in Beats and this is particularly true as one examines the script of the film written by Miles Orion Feldsott.

The table below represents a collection of swearing words used by the characters together with the number of their occurrences in the script.

| Swear words | Number of uses |
|--------------|----------------|
| Shit | 98 |
| Fuck | 59 |
| Ass | 41 |
| Nigga | 35 |
| Damn | 23 |
| Hell | 17 |
| Motherfucker | 8 |
| Bitch | 7 |

It can be said that shit, fuck, ass, and the N-word are the most frequent swear words used by the characters. Swearing can be viewed as very informal and inappropriate for non-native speakers of English; however, it is not considered as a taboo phenomenon in Beats.

Jay and Janschewitz (2008) contend that "the main purpose of swearing is to express emotions, especially anger and frustration. Swear words are well suited to express emotion as their primary meanings are connotative" (p.267). They add that "the emotional impact of swearing depends on one's experience with a culture and its language conventions" (p. 267).

Swearing in the film must be placed in its sociolinguistic and cultural context. In her relevant book *Who's Swearing Now?* (2012), Kristy Beers Fägersten, professor of linguistics at Stockholm University, contends that profanity is used in the everyday language of Americans. She also stresses the fact that African-Americans as a minority racial and cultural group "distinguish themselves from the majority by linguistic means in order to express ethnicity and a sense of cultural distinctiveness" (p. 56). Spears (2001) adds that directness is a highly important aspect of African-American culture and it involves "cussin out (cursing directed to a particular addressee)" (p. 240).

The controversial N-word is used thirty-five times throughout the movie. The term refers to African-Americans in a pejorative manner when it is used by Whites or non-African-Americans. The N-word is so disrespectful to African-Americans that the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) condemns its use. The civil rights association even buried the word during a mock ceremony in Detroit, Michigan on July 9, 2007. The N-word is used in a non-pejorative way within the African-American community to show "solidarity or affection" (Herbst, 1997, p. 80). So Beats highlights the use of the N-word in a positive way, similar to the words "dude" or "bro". Romelo repeatedly calls August an N-word without any hatred or racism.

One last thing to add in this section is that Beats accurately depicts the traumatic consequences of gun

violence on teenagers. Robinson does not romanticize violence as do the film directors of *Scarface* (1983), *New Jack City* (1991), or *American Gangster* (2007) where criminals are represented in a beautiful way; on the contrary, he tries to film reality as it is in ghettos. The film director uses POV to capture August's psychic condition as illustrated by the following shots:

Figure 6



01:35:43

Figure 7



01:35:43

Figure 8



01:35:53

Brown (2016) notes that point-of-view (POV) is “to have the camera see something in much the same way as one of the characters would see it: to view the scene from that character’s point-of-view” (p.10). The POV shot is a relevant cinematic technique that allows viewers to share the feelings of August who is

disoriented because of the PTSD effect. The blurred images stress the fact that August is lost in the crowd and viewers share the same disorientation as the main character.

4. Celebrating South Side Chicago

Chris Robinson’s film is also concerned with celebrating the City of Chicago, and its African-American culture and lifestyle. It can be said that *Beats* is viewed as a tribute to the African-American community of the South Side and in a way the film encourages residents of blocks to take pride in their city.

Most of the scenes of *Beats* were filmed in ghettos of Chicago and Robinson chose to represent a number of famous geographical locations of the South Side area such as Roseland or Bronzeville. Also, the film director focused on depicting the lifestyle of the residents of the South Side. Viewers are shown how African-Americans spend their leisure time as they play bowling on Terrence Avenue or they eat in Harold’s Chicken. So, viewers learn from the film that there are several amusements that are part of the culture of Chicago’s South Side.

Furthermore, the film exposes how stylish African-Americans of South Side Chicago are as contended by their dress code. The costumes of *Beats* were designed by Mercedes Cook who also worked as a costume designer for the series *Sleep Hollow* (2013) and the films *Selma* (2014) and *Dirty Granpa* (2016). The underlined message conveyed by the costumes of *Beats* is that despite the fact African-Americans live in poor neighborhoods, they wear fashionable clothes including jeans, stylish T-shirts, sweats, caps, and sneakers. Even the two white characters of the movie Terrence (Paul Walter Hauser) and Big Dude (Michael David Hammond) wear fashionable clothes and speak the African-American vernacular English used in the urban communities of South Side Chicago.

Another important aspect of African-American culture that is emphasized in *Beats* is the use of colloquialism in addition to cursing that has been dealt with before. In fact, the script reveals that some words of the

African-American vernacular English were used as shown in the table below.

| African-American Vernacular English | Number of uses |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|
| Man | 166 |
| Ain't | 49 |
| Come on | 47 |
| Alright | 44 |
| Nah | 20 |
| What's up | 16 |
| Yo | 14 |

African-American vernacular English has its own unique grammatical, vocabulary and accent features. Also, several slang words spoken in Chicago are used by the characters of the film. Words such as merch (to ask for proof), goofy (being ridiculous), and opps (rival gang members) originated in Chicago and are used by residents of the African-American community.

The characters of *Beats* use a number of Chicago slang words to sound like real Chicagoan residents and this establishes in a way a form of authenticity as viewers feel they are watching a realistic movie about the citizens of Chicago. It should also be noted that the film features a number of actors who are natives of Chicago and this can be regarded as an appropriate tribute to the city. Khalil Everage, Seandrea Sledge, Jeremy Philips, Evan J. Simpson, Julian Williams, and Ahmad Nicolas Ferguson were born in Chicago and still live there. These Chicagoan newcomers acted naturally although they were not experienced but they were supervised by the talented actor Anthony Anderson who worked also as the executive producer of the movie.

Beats portrays the City of Chicago in a positive way; however, the film also focuses on the plight of African-Americans in the ghetto. As a matter of fact, celebrating the City of Chicago is about providing a realistic account of the daily life of the Chicagoans who face poverty and hardships. *Beats* was filmed in neighborhoods with high-density black working-class populations. The buildings are located in areas

where a significant number of people suffer social and economic decay.

Poverty in the film is embodied in Mrs. Monroe, a black working-class single mother who is struggling to make ends meet. She works in a retail store and needs to be available at night and during weekend to perform her duties.

Mrs. Monroe and her son live in a modest house that lacks a porch. The Monroes do not live in decent housing condition as emphasized by Romelo who tells August that their house “ain't exactly the penthouse”.

The City of Chicago has long been defined by its income segregation. Indeed, according to statistics, more than three-fifth of Chicago's census tracts are not higher income. In fact, “areas of both higher and lower incomes have grown” (WBEZ, 2019). It means that Chicago has become more polarized as the other cities of the USA where the middle class is shrinking.

Beats ends by showing viewers a ray of hope as August starts back at school and makes music along with Romelo. This happy ending is typical of many coming-of-age movies and one is to ask whether *Beats* has received positive reviews from film critics and viewers. The next and last section will investigate the reception of *Beats*.

5. Reception of Movies in the Digital Age

In film studies, assessing the reception of a movie involves examining how viewers respond to it. Roughly speaking, the reception of a movie aims at investigating the reactions of viewers and tries to find out whether they liked it or not. Villarejo (2007) points out that reception “describes a broad set of questions about how we, as spectators positioned by the films themselves and by our social roles, respond experimentally and intellectually to film” (p. 131).

Viewers are not simply entertained by the movie they watch; they are also invited to engage in a reflection about several issues which speak to them. In the case of *Beats*, spectators are introduced with the race and social problems of the African-American community of Chicago whose members face gun violence and poverty.

4,531 IMDb users who watched *Beats* gave a weighted average vote of 6.4/10 while the review-aggregation website Rotten Tomatoes pointed out that “*Beats* is an entertaining- if all too familiar- coming-of-age story that is elevated by Anthony Anderson’s excellent performance” (2019). *Beats* received generally positive reviews from film critics as Rotten Tomatoes indicates that the film holds an approval rating of 89% based on nine reviews.

New York Times reporter Sean T. Collins (2019), however, criticized some aspects of the movie and asserted that “since neither the story nor the songs adequately sell August’s predicament, it falls on the cast to attempt both”. John Serba from the website *Decider* called readers to stream *Beats*, but at the same time he argued that the film was “a classic case of extraordinary acting saving a movie from its script issues and boilerplate story beats” (2019). The two reviewers criticize the plot and the script of the film which, according to them, fail to depict the realities of young Chicagoans who face gun violence. The film critic from the website *Polygon* Karen Han compares *Beats* to a “Trojan horse” which “fails to find a groove” (2019). She is very critical as she believes that the film can mislead viewers by integrating too many topics at the same time. Perhaps the film director should have focused on one specific issue and this could have been done by relying on a consistent script and a coherent storyline.

The inconsistency of the movie is also embodied in the views of the Google users who watched the film. Globally speaking, 187 out of 212 viewers liked *Beats*. Nine viewers did not like it whereas sixteen viewers expressed opinions about other aspects of the movie. Thirty-four viewers did not like the ending of the film whereas forty-two others wanted Robinson to think about a sequel to the film by directing *Beats 2*.

Plantinga (2009) argues that scholars working on motion pictures should be concerned about the affective experiences of film viewers since “emotion and affect are fundamental to what makes films artistically successful, rhetorically powerful, and culturally influential” (p. 5). Indeed, eliciting emotions in *Beats* is a central element of the film

experience. Viewers have sympathized with the protagonist August. Eighteen viewers said the movie was emotional whereas twelve viewers stated that it was inspirational. Ten others said the film touched their heart.

Chris Robinson’s *Beats* provides insightful reflections about what it is to be an African-American teenager of South Side Chicago who tries to deal with surviving shooting. The story of August embodies the life of so many African-American teenagers and therefore viewers sympathized with the life of the teenager.

The film also illustrates the struggle of African-American working-class single mothers who try to raise their kids and make ends meet. Furthermore, *Beats* conveys an optimistic message as it celebrates the urban space of Chicago while ending on a positive note with August being able to get by through hip-hop music.

It should also be recognized that watching *Beats* has to be analyzed within the context of the global pandemic of COVID-19. Netflix saw subscriber numbers surge during 2020 as lockdowns around the world kept people at home where they wanted to be entertained. Almost 16 million people created accounts in the first three months of the year (BBC News, 2020).

In fact, within the context of digital distribution, Netflix has fundamentally altered how people watch TV. Biesen (2019) asserts that Netflix has been critiqued “for its capacity to revolutionize the way we watch cinema and television and for fostering a new, changing media production, distribution, and reception climate that has dramatically transformed in an era of ‘video on demand’ (VOD) media streaming and binge watching home viewership” (p. 163). Netflix makes binge watching easier for subscribers who are provided with a catalogue that allows them to watch several episodes of the same show in one sitting. Gomez-Urbe and Hunt (2015) suggest that users can select contents “based on the algorithmic analysis of their preferences and tastes” (p. 9). It means that Netflix will automatically recommend subscribers who have watched *Beats* to watch other movies about African-Americans who live in inner-city neighborhoods.

6. Conclusion

Chris Robinson's artistic work is a tool of entertainment which also offers a critical look at the struggle of African-Americans in the USA of the twenty-first century.

Beats invites its audience to reflect upon the crucial issues of gun violence in America's inner cities. The comment of August as he compares his PTSD condition to "somebody's standing on your chest" is very relevant. The teenager adds "can't barely breathe" and this probably reminds the film viewers of the phrase "I can't breathe" that was uttered by Eric Garner, Elijah McClain, and George Floyd, among many others, prior to their death. The phrase became a slogan associated with the Black Lives Matter movement and in a sense August informs viewers that African-Americans are still suffocating because of poverty, segregation, and gun violence.

In short, the film Beats embodies a subtle message which encourages the African-American people to carry on with their struggle for equal rights and better opportunities.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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