

ZEBRAHEAD: MOVIE REVIEW

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The movie *Zebrahead*, is a fierce attack on American race relations and the way that they are portrayed in film. *Zebrahead* stands on its own merit as the most penetrating probe of inner-city inter-ethnic strife in the nineteen-nineties. Zack (Jewish) and Dee (Black) are best friends and a rap duo at a Detroit high school. Dee's beautiful cousin Nikki comes from Brooklyn, New York. Zack has no mother, Nikki has no father: together they become perfect emotionally dysfunctional lovers. The rest of the cast of characters argue whether that's right or wrong. Zack admits, "Technically, I am white," but defends what Nikki calls his being "more on the homeboy side than the white boy side." "This is Detroit," says Zack, "this is where I live. You know, I may not live downtown, but this is still a predominantly Black city. This is me, though; this is who I am."

After their first kiss, Zack and Nikki are conversing on a park bench, surrounded by lush grass and a clear, blue lake. The industrial factories of the city are clearly visible from afar. The metaphor is unmistakable: Zack and Nikki are now outside of the city limits, both geographically and socially. Their relationship is taboo; twenty-five years after the first interracial kiss on television between the Jewish Kirk and the Black Ursula on *Star Trek*, many white and black Americans still consider the idea of an interracial couple as a challenge to their set of perceived socially acceptable norms and conventions.

Uncovering the veneer of "teen romance," *Zebrahead* is really about race; Drazan uses the story of Zack and Nikki as a vehicle to explore cultural conflict in America today. In an interview with *Premiere Magazine*, Drazan emphasized: "*Zebrahead* is not an interracial love story. It's a film about friendships." In fact, *Zebrahead* is the among the first movies of its genre to portray a friendship between white and black teens. And in spite of the slough of films that Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* and more recently, John Singleton's *Boyz N The Hood* spawned, *Zebrahead* remains the only picture of its kind to include realistic parental figures that surpass the one-dimensionality of a Furious Styles. Drazan says this was intentional: "... I want [kids] to go home talking about it and have their parents wanting to see it just as much. I want to capture the points of view of multigenerations."

The significance of rap music to *Zebrahead* cannot be overstated. MC Serch, a Jewish rapper, was recruited to produce the soundtrack for the movie. To this end, Serch assembled a line-up consisting of some of

today's most important hip-hop acts: Nas (formerly Nasty Nas), whose 1994 debut *Illmatic* was the biggest solo album of the year; Boss, the first female gangsta rapper; and, The Goats, a racially mixed rap group that is getting a lot of props from Black and non-Black hip-hop fans alike. Their contributions to the *Zebrahead* soundtrack add credibility to the production. Inherent in the "sampling" of rap music are the post-modern elements of reappropriation and recombination. Found sounds from records, movies, and other media are spliced together, juxtaposed to create something entirely new and different. While many rap deejays and producers are content to continually rip off the same old James Brown funk beats, in *Zebrahead*, Zack lays down an assortment of jazz, rock, and even opera riffs, recontextualizing them in a hip-hop tradition to produce a truly awesome soundscape.

However, despite the honest intentions of Zack, his motives are perpetually questioned. Dee's dad asks Zack: "You gonna be [Dee's] promoter? You gonna take half of every dollar he makes?" The accusations of Black Muslim student Vinnie sting deeper: "Only brothers can be [rappers] ... [you] went into Africa, took our music, took our people, now here in America you're going to take rap? Bull, not anymore ..." Zack does not have to answer for whites who have exploited Black musical talent, but he does have to ask himself, as Nikki asks him, the one question: Why is he different from all other whites?

Zack's ex-girlfriend Michelle throws a party and invites Zack and Nikki. Here Drazan takes aim at white racism. The party-goers shoot looks at Nikki: What is a black woman doing at this party? Drazan focuses his lens on white so-called liberals: Nikki examines a small sculpture, and Michelle explains it's Eskimo; her mother studies art and anthropology—synonyms for pop and culture. Her interest in "exotic" art is patronizing at best, racist at worst. Is Zack's attraction to Nikki just an interest in the exotic, as Spike Lee claims in *Jungle Fever*? Zack doesn't help his own cause when a couple of friends at the party ask him, "What's it like fuckin' a Black chick?"

While Drazan has come out and admitted that *Zebrahead* is semi-autobiographical, he hasn't elaborated as to which scenes in particular were drawn from his personal experiences. Drazan's portrayal of Zack's awkwardness is honest, bearing no trace of overprotective direction. However, he reveals his close ties to the character in this particular scene. The dialogue between Zack and his friends takes place in Michelle's kitchen, and it is heard but not seen. The camera remains outside, in the living room, because for Drazan, it is too painful to see himself repeat the mistake of saying "The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice," a mistake that no doubt took a heavy toll on his adolescence.

At this point in the film, Zack's father and grandfather's old R & B record store goes bankrupt. It is not without irony that Saul's Medley Land is replaced by Hassan's Store for a New Age. Saul's Medley Land was the "place" that "souls" of different races could "mix together" (in a Detroit accent, Saul even sounds like soul). But in today's "New Age," many Blacks frustrated by the inaction of the American government are demanding separation, not integration. The new allies of African Americans are not Jewish Americans, represented by Saul, but Muslim Americans, represented by Hassan.

It is also no coincidence that Saul's Medley Land was located underneath an expressway. It was the construction of similar highways through black neighbourhoods in the Bronx, in New York City, during the nineteen-seventies that would drive property values down, and result in widespread poverty. Poor living conditions sowed discontent in the black community and provided fertile soil for the development of rap music. Urban decay has not only meant the demise of many "mom-and-pop" shops, like Saul's Medley Land, but has also stimulated a demand for harsher, grittier types of Black music, like rap and hip-hop.

Zebrahead is the first non-documentary film to criticize the corruption of the Nation of Islam and other Black Muslim groups. The fact that Vinnie lives in a mansion next door to Michelle is obviously an attack on Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the NOI, who lives in the lap of luxury. Later, after Nut kills Dee, Vinnie deliberates silently to himself: "... don't know if I should blame Nut ... or I should blame Dee ..." Still later, Vinnie proclaims to all that Dee died because "... The truth is, the white devil didn't have Dee's back." The Nation of Islam puts the blame for Black fratricide exclusively on whites, and especially on Jews.

Unfortunately, Drazen has deracinated *Zebrahead* in order to reach a wider audience. There are a couple of minor references to Jewish life-cycle events—such as Zack's bar mitzvah, the yartzheit memorial candle for Zack's mother, and the recitation of kaddish (the mourner's liturgy) for Dee, but noticeably missing are ethnic slurs and pejorative references to Zack's Jewish heritage, which could be expected from a member of the Nation of Islam. Drazen told *Premiere* that *Zebrahead* was originally set in the nineteen-seventies—a time of far less hostility between the African American and Jewish American communities. When Drazen updated the script, he did not fully adapt it to concur with today's realities.

Now enraged with Zack, and exasperated by Nut's constant interjections, Nikki demands, "Why you always gotta make so much noise?" to which Nut retorts, "To be heard." Nikki's soft-spoken reply:

“Well, you don’t need to be heard, ‘cause I can hear you fine without all that.” Toronto film critic Derek Chezzi thinks that her message could be directed to Vinnie as well: it is not necessary to reject the “other” in order to identify with one’s own ethnicity. Dee can retain his Christian religion, Nikki can retain her straight hair, and they can still be proud to be black, both Africans and Americans.

Nikki kisses Nut, then pulls back, afraid. Later, Zack apologizes to Nikki, and she leaves the window open for a reconciliation. That night, at the roller-skating rink, Nut harasses Nikki, then threatens Zack. Dee steps in, and pushes Nut over. Nut pulls out a “gat,” Dee falls over. The choice of location for this scene is very symbolic: the potential dangers present when lots of people are going around in circles at very high speeds suggests the cycle of violence that is killing hundreds of young black teenagers every year—“as if this absurd geometrical analogy explains anything.”

Dee’s funeral is a plea to recognize the universality of precious life: a Christian minister delivers a eulogy, Zack recites the Jewish prayer for mourners, and Vinnie chants “*Allah u-Akbar*”, Arabic for “God is great.” As the clergyman concludes the service, the camera pulls away and focuses on the industrial transport trucks and trains indifferently rolling by in the distance. Once again, the powers-that-be are brought to bear some responsibility for the senseless death of yet another young Black male.

Three sequences in *Zebrahead* form a thread that seems to be unconnected to the rest of the plotline. In the very first scene of the movie, Zack witnesses Dominic toss a lit match onto his lawn and a patch of earth goes up in flames. Dominic’s backyard borders an industrial plant which leaks waste onto his property. “It’s not their problem, it’s, it’s ours,” Dominic mutters to no one in particular. Later, Zack brings Nikki to the house, and lights his own pyre. Dominic appears and chases them away, screaming, “Is this a fucking game to you?” Finally, in the second-to-last scene of the movie, Dominic sets the grass alight, and watches the flames spread to the next yard.

In this instance, the industrial waste and the fires are an analogy to racial tension and the violence that it sparks. The first scene is an indictment of the government for not taking steps to augment the peace. Dominic’s castigation of Zack is similar to remarks made by Nikki’s mother when Zack arrives to pick her up for their first date: “Is this a curiosity thing, you dating my daughter? You slummin’ or what?” They challenge Zack’s intentions, with the knowledge that his actions will result

in confrontation. The third fire signifies that the problem is not isolated to this situation, that it is a problem of national proportions.

In the final scene of the movie, Drazen spoon-feeds the audience with preachy monologues from Zack and Nikki, in the words of Michael Sragow of *The New Yorker*, "reducing them to poster kids promoting racial understanding." *Film Journal* even calls *Zebrahead* "an Afterschool Special, only with the f-word." These criticisms recall the standard critique of the "Viet Nam" films of Oliver Stone. But J. Hoberman of *The Village Voice* half-justifies Stone's "maddening propensity to nudge the audience" because "the incidents ... have the authority of events that have been witnessed."

Anthony Drazen may be one of the new breed of political, responsible filmmakers, but it seems that in the political climate of today's society, he'll need to shout in order for his message to be heard. And although, as Karen Kreps points out, Drazen offers no solutions, at least he points his accusatory finger in the right direction—at ourselves.

Join in a Century of Equal Opportunity
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It is my honor to stand before you today not only as president of this great nation but as the first woman president of the United States of America. Our nation was founded on the principle that "all men are created equal." Thomas Jefferson believed that all people should participate in government and have the right to vote. Women have struggled for these rights since this nation's birth.

In the 1800s social reformers such as Elizabeth Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Lucy Stone, formed organizations that sought better education, property rights, and suffrage for women. Their dedication and hard work slowly led to reform, and in 1920 the 19th amendment to the Constitution was passed, granting women the right to vote. In the 1960s a new wave of women activists banded together to seek equal pay for equal