



**MORRICONE**

# White Dog

## **SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

*White Dog* opens, like Kieslowski's *Three Colours: Red*, with a young woman – Julie Sawyer, an actress (played by Kristy McNichol) – hitting a dog with her car and not fleeing the scene, her kind nature leading her from taking responsibility for her actions into a larger story of proactive human responsibility. The white German shepherd she has struck is discovered to be not just an attack dog, as initially suspected when it saves her from an attempted rape, but a 'white dog' – specifically trained by racist owners to attack and kill black people. While everyone in Julie's life, including her screenwriter boyfriend (Jameson Parker), encourages her to have the dog destroyed, she takes it to a Hollywood trained-animal compound for reconditioning. The principal owner, Carruthers (Burl Ives), refuses, but his black partner Keys (Paul Winfield) accepts the challenge, finding the killing of the dog analogous to admitting that racism cannot be unlearned, and promising to shoot the animal if he can't redirect its hateful impulses within five weeks.

Directed by Samuel Fuller, who co-scripted with Curtis Hanson, *White Dog* is compelling in several ways – as a study in good and evil, as a detective story involving animal psychology, as an acting tour de force from a robust and fully committed Winfield (who did all his own stunts), and as a postscript to Fuller's career-long interest in race as a factor in human relationships (as found in *Shock Corridor*, *The Crimson Kimono*, *Run of the Arrow*).

**Tim Lucas, *Sight & Sound*, February 2009**

## **A contemporary review**

The opening shot in *White Dog* is of total darkness rent by a loud crash and a moment later by the beam of a flashlight as a girl gets out of her car and picks her way back to a dog lying injured in the road. To be overly symbolic about it, one might say that this suggests the black consciousness soon to be roused by this hellhound appearing out of the night, out of nowhere, out (almost) of the subconscious imagination. Fortunately, Fuller neither invites nor needs such interpretation, although symbolism of sorts is in fact supported both by the hint of a pastoral Eden about the actress' hilltop home, and by the echo of a calvary in the church killing, where the victim being savaged painfully drags himself up the aisle past stations represented by the saints in their niches.

Surprisingly, given all the nervous fuss that has attended the film, it turns out to be (exactly as one might have expected from Fuller) an unimpeachable liberal tract where racist attitudes are concerned. In his book, in full awareness that he risked misinterpretation, Romain Gary ventured into much more troubled waters, not only implying that the 'white dog' was deliberately retrained as a 'black dog', but using the dog's story to explore areas of bad faith in racial relations, notably by the Black Panthers who sometimes exploited his wife Jean Seberg's liberal Hollywood conscience for personal and pecuniary ends. Fuller removes all this, leaving only characters reaching across the colour divide to join hands in battle against racism.

If the film is 'controversial', it is in its subtle undermining of these comfortable liberal attitudes. Keys explains to a horrified Julie how a white dog is created (originally for use in dealing with runaway slaves, nowadays as a guard dog): by paying a black junkie in desperate need of money to beat a puppy daily until fear-hate conditioning sets in. Both accept that an attempt to break this conditioning must be made, since the only alternative is to have the dog put down (or, unthinkably, returned to its original owner). But the extraordinary thing about the film is that, without ever resorting to the facile devices of anthropomorphism, it lets the dog query the validity of what is being done to it in the interests of humanity.

Fuller apparently shot some black-and-white footage representing a dog's-eye-view, none of which remains in the film. But other sequences, not quite subjective (though sometimes shot with the camera level low enough to be described as dog's eye, notably in the church sequence), suggest a two-way exchange of viewpoint. For example, the camera tracks down an empty corridor in Julie's apartment as the dog makes its first tour of inspection there, a trajectory later followed exactly when the prowler breaks in and makes his way through the apartment to Julie's room. The ambivalent identification of dog and prowler in a man-made alliance here (drowsing in front of a TV set before it leaps to attack the prowler, the dog appears to be watching a particularly explosive war movie) is carried into further shades of meaning when the dog eyes a rabbit through a hole in the wall, takes off in joyous pursuit through a wood, and runs fatefully into one of the blacks who have been turned into its unnatural prey.

If the dog here seems banished from the innocence of the Garden of Eden, then the killing in the church, with the camera panning round the walls to rest finally on a stained glass window representing St Francis of Assisi, makes a further bitter comment on humanity's 'love of all living things'. Most tellingly of all, perhaps, is the way in which the huge domed cage where Keys does his retraining, a blemish on the wild and beautiful valley in which it nestles, is shot to suggest a gladiatorial arena. Denying the dog food, exhausting it in fruitless attacks on his protective clothing, Keys never 'maltreats' the dog; yet subjected to a brainwashing it cannot comprehend, attacked with weapons to which it has no answer, it is as hapless as any Christian thrown to the lions.

What makes *White Dog* so moving, finally, is the naked simplicity, worthy of Griffith, with which Fuller deploys emotion: in the repeated close-ups of eyes as man and animal stare at each other in a futile attempt at mutual comprehension, in the sudden rushes of deep and playful affection, in the use of slow-motion to capture the mingled beauty and menace of the canine movements. Yet there is subtle imagination at work, too: marvellous shots of the dog wandering alone through the night, pacing its cage in stubborn defiance, and stirring nervous pandemonium among the other zoo captives, which recall the supernatural mysteries of Franju's *Judex* and Bresson's *Au hasard, Balthazar*. Most uncannily of all, Fuller constructs an incredible performance out of the dog's uncertain, staccato movements and anxious hesitations until one would swear that, in an agony of confusion as to exactly what is expected of it, it is on the point of complete nervous breakdown. A remarkable movie; probably a great one.

**Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, February 1984**

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## WHITE DOG

*Director:* Samuel Fuller  
*Production Company:*  
Paramount Pictures Corporation  
*Executive Producers:* Edgar J. Scherick, Nick Vanoff  
*Producer:* Jon Davison  
*Associate Producer/Unit Production Manager:* Richard Hashimoto  
*Location Manager:* Mike Meehan  
*Assistant Directors:* William Scott, Daniel Attias  
*Screenplay:* Samuel Fuller, Curtis Hanson  
*Original novel and story:* Romain Gary  
*Director of Photography:* Bruce Surtees  
*Camera Operator:* Rick Neff  
*Special Effects:* John Frazier  
*Editor:* Bernard Gribble  
*Production Designer:* Brian Eatwell  
*Set Designer:* Geoff Hubbard  
*Set Decorator:* Barbara Krieger  
*Men's Costumes:* Ellis Cohen  
*Women's Costumes:* Gail Viola  
*Prosthetics:* Dave Allen  
*Music:* Ennio Morricone  
*Sound Re-recording:* Bob Gravenor  
*Stunt Co-ordinator:* Bob Minor  
*Stunts:* Kerrie Cullen, Jadie David, Gene Lebell, Steve Earl Martin, Sherry Peterson, Wallace Ross, John Sherrod, Eddie Smith, Marvin Walters, George P. Wilbur  
*Dog Trainers:* Karl Lewis Miller, Animal Action, Glen Garner, Joe Hornok

## Cast

Kristy McNichol (*Julie Sawyer*)  
Paul Winfield (*Keys*)  
Burl Ives (*Carruthers*)  
Jameson Parker (*Roland Gray*)  
Lynne Moody (*Molly*)  
Marshall Thompson (*director*)  
Bob Minor (*Joe*)  
Vernon Weddle (*vet*)  
Christa Lang (*nurse*)  
Tony Brubaker (*sweeper driver*)  
Samuel Fuller (*Cherlie Felton*)  
Paul Bartel (*cameraman*)  
Martine Dawson (*Martine*)  
Alex A. Brown (*man attacked in church*)  
Parley Baer (*Wilber Hull*)  
Karl Lewis Miller (*rapist*)  
Karrie Emerson (*sunbather*)  
Helen J. Siff (*pound telephone operator*)  
Glen D. Garner (*pound worker*)  
Terrence Beasor (*pound driver*)  
Richard Monahan (*assistant director*)  
Neyle Morrow (*soundman*)  
George Fisher (*Gondolier*)  
Hubert Wells (*trainer*)  
Dick Miller, Robert Ritchie (*animal trainers*)  
Cliff Pellow (*sheriff*)  
Sam Laws (*Charlie*)  
Samantha Fuller (*Helen*)  
Jamie Crowe (*Theona*)  
Joseph R. Hornok (*guitar player*)

USA 1982

90 mins

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## MORRICONE

### The Battle of Algiers (La battaglia di Algeri)

Sun 1 Aug 15:10; Wed 25 Aug 14:30

### The Sounds of Ennio Morricone

Mon 2 Aug 18:10

### A Fistful of Dollars (Per un pugno di dollari)

Mon 2 Aug 20:45; Sat 7 Aug 11:30; Tue 10 Aug 20:50; Mon 30 12:20

### Two Mules for Sister Sara

Wed 4 Aug 18:00; Sat 21 Aug 20:30

### Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom (Salò o Le 120 giornate di Sodoma)

Thu 5 Aug 20:45; Tue 10 Aug 17:45; Wed 25 Aug 17:50

### The Untouchables

Fri 6 Aug 17:45; Tue 24 Aug 14:30

### The Thing

Fri 6 Aug 20:50; Tue 24 Aug 20:50

### For a Few Dollars More (Per qualche dollaro in più)

Sat 7 Aug 14:00; Sun 22 Aug 12:10; Mon 30 Aug 15:00

### The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo)

Sat 7 Aug 17:10; Sun 29 Aug 18:20; Mon 30 Aug 18:15

### White Dog

Sat 7 Aug 20:50; Fri 20 Aug 18:10; Fri 27 Aug 20:45

### Once upon a Time in the West (C'era una volta il west)

Sun 8 Aug 12:00; Fri 27 Aug 14:00; Tue 31 Aug 14:00

### The Mission

Sun 8 Aug 15:10; Thu 12 Aug 20:30; Thu 26 Aug 18:00

### Days of Heaven

Mon 9 Aug 21:00; Tue 31 Aug 17:50

### Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down (Atame!)

Wed 11 Aug 20:50; Thu 19 Aug 14:15; Mon 23 Aug 21:00;

Tue 31 Aug 20:45

### The Hateful Eight

Sun 15 Aug 15:00; Sun 22 Aug 18:00

### Once upon a Time in America

Tue 17 Aug 17:40; Sat 28 Aug 11:20

### The Legend of 1900 (La leggenda del pianista sull'oceano)

Sat 21 Aug 11:50; Sun 29 Aug 15:10

### Cinema Paradiso (Nuovo Cinema Paradiso)

Sat 21 Aug 14:30; Thu 26 Aug 14:30

### Promotional partner



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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

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