



SMALL AXE

Red, White and Blue

Reject existing systems, or change them from within? Opt out, or risk selling out? This chapter in Steve McQueen's *Small Axe* anthology approaches this most pivotal conundrum for social and political movements in a manner at once uncompromising and warmly humane.

The source for *Red, White and Blue*, scripted by McQueen and Courttia Newland, is the life story of Leroy Logan, a Black 30-year veteran of the Metropolitan Police. Leroy's initial entry into the police force horrified his father Kenneth, who had been victim of a serious incident of police brutality, and Leroy's many career successes were countered from the off by the efforts of racist colleagues to undermine and scupper him.

McQueen's film begins with Kenneth (Steve Toussaint) intervening angrily when the young Leroy (Nathan Vidal) is stopped by the local officers on the beat. In this brief sequence, key points are established: that Leroy is the polite, respectable child his father expects him to be; that exquisite presentation and behaviour won't necessarily protect him from police harassment; and that Kenneth is prepared to be as forthright with the police as he is as a father. 'I'm the only authority you need,' he tells Leroy after the encounter – a line that emphasises the fact that this story is about embattled masculinity as well as racism. When the adult Leroy (John Boyega) considers becoming a beat cop, his partner (Antonia Thomas) teases, 'It appeals to your macho, vain sensibility!'

It is with the strong encouragement of another determined, clear-sighted woman, his best friend's mother Jesse (Nadine Marshall), that Leroy feels able to pursue his police career. In Jesse's family, 'selling out' has paid off: her son Lee (Tyrone Huntley) has found success and recognition as lead singer with the soul band Imagination.

But if being an entertainer is a pathway for a young Black man that is acceptable to both his Black community and the white establishment, joining the police challenges both. Even Lee is outraged by Leroy's choice. Kids on the street decry him as a 'coconut' (white on the inside), and his white peers conspire to make things difficult for him. Their racism starts out subtle, possibly even unconscious – 'You've got a right jungle to work,' says Leroy's boss as he sends him out on to the same streets he grew up on – but escalates into outright abuse.

Boyega – a global star thanks to his appearances in *Episodes VII, VIII* and *IX* of *Star Wars*, who spoke to indelible effect at a Black Lives Matter protest in London in June and subsequently criticised the *Star Wars* juggernaut for 'pushing to the side' its non-white characters – plays Leroy as a contained and thoughtful man, a still point in a storm. With his anger, his physical strength and his sexuality all held in careful abeyance most of the time, Boyega embodies the Catch-22 of Leroy's position: for any chance of

advancement, this man must be a paragon, yet by being a paragon, he inflames the jealousy of his antagonists.

Boyega's control and quietude allow breathing space to a production that makes impeccable use of sound, music and physical detail – be it the happily overstuffed living rooms and dinner tables of Leroy's extended family, the strip-lit grimness of the hospital room in which he almost fails to recognise his bruised and battered father, or the squeak of trainers on gymnasium floor as he systematically outruns the rest of his training cohort.

In a scene that feels like the emotional centre of the whole film, McQueen lets music do the talking, Al Green's extraordinary interpretation of the Bee Gees' 'How Can You Mend a Broken Heart?' playing as Kenneth drops his son off to begin his officer training. *Red, White and Blue* offers no easy answers with regard to the mending of hearts, relationships or broken social structures. And it opts not to remind us that, before the close of his career, the real Leroy Logan covered himself in establishment glory. Instead, it sits stoically with awkwardness – that of belonging and not belonging; of achieving and compromising; of being unjustly hated and imperfectly loved.

Hannah McGill, *Sight & Sound*, Winter 2020-2021

In the space between photo opportunities and equal opportunities stands PC Leroy Logan. Tall and proud, shoulders back, eyes front, he outwardly betrays nothing of the inner turmoil and external contradictions he faces: a genuine aspiration in search of the good faith, an individual within an institution, the embodiment of both promise and betrayal.

Logan, a former superintendent in the Metropolitan police, once used in the ads to recruit more 'coloured' police, was literally the poster boy for the force. In *Red, White and Blue* we also see that, even as the Met uses his presence to suggest barriers were being broken down, he was the subject of sustained abuse from racist colleagues, thwarted in his efforts to progress, and mistrusted by most within the Black community, including some within his own family.

In the film, Logan, played by John Boyega, says he has applied to the force to 'combat negatives', and feels 'he's got to be a bridge'. But the negatives are everywhere, which means the bridge he seeks to be can find no firm land on either side. And so the space in which he stands is suspended, without visible support, leaving him precarious and isolated, perched on a flimsy structure he has wished into being.

The film is, in part, a depiction of the limits of an individual within an institution. Logan joins with good intentions. But there is only so much a person can do when confronted with the processes within a toxic structure and the culture of a discriminatory organisation. When he wears the uniform, he dons the collective burden of responsibility for a body which many Black Britons regarded as a hostile occupying force. They either cannot see his intentions for the badge, do not trust them, believe that the badge will always take precedence over the intentions, or all three. Either way, they will not cooperate.

Logan, who has a degree, is more educated than his colleagues. But, despite graduating from the police academy with top marks, he cannot progress because he fails to 'blend in'. His disappointment, rapidly curdling into disgust and outrage, is a cruel illustration that you cannot earn, learn, behave or charm your way out of racism. Those attributes may be valuable in their own right; but they are not in themselves sufficient guarantors that your humanity will be respected.

Logan's dad, Kenneth, does not conceal his dismay at his son's career choice. And when Kenneth is badly beaten up by the police when challenging a bogus parking violation, those instincts appear confirmed. In this relationship, which plays a central role in the film, we see the baton pass from the migrant generation to their children.

The precise period in which the film is set matters but remains unclear. The decor, music and occasional dance moves suggest the late 1970s. Logan's reference to his friend Lee John's success as a pop singer in 'Imagination' points to early 1981.

It matters because by the end of that year Britain's cities would go up in flames in a series of rebellions against police harassment within the broader context of Thatcherite austerity. One of Logan's white colleagues warns him: 'It's a jungle out there.' Another tells him: 'It's us or them,' but since no one mentions the riots, one must assume they haven't happened yet. So the space in which Logan operates and seeks to expand, attempting to effect reform and build community confidence, is already small and about to shrink even further. In another part of the city a smart young boy full of promise, Stephen Lawrence, is about to start primary school.

We leave Logan struggling to work out whether his mission is worth it, uncertain whether the bridge he seeks to build is a viable proposition, or whether he will descend to the depths of despair beneath him. Not knowing whether his task is Sisyphean or merely Herculean, and weighing the cost to himself and the society he wishes to create if he walks away – unaware that things are about to get a whole lot worse before they get better.

Gary Younge, bfi.org.uk, 25 November 2020

RED, WHITE AND BLUE

Directed by: Steve McQueen
©: Small Axe Films Ltd
a Turbine Studios and Lammas Park *production*
In association with: Small Axe Films, Emu Films
Supported by: Creative England
Creative England, a project part financed by the:
European Regional Development Fund programme 2007-2013
In association with: BBC Studios Distribution, Six Temple Productions
For: BBC, Amazon Studios
Presented by: BBC, BBC Films
Executive Producers: Tracey Scoffield, David Tanner, Steve McQueen, Paul Ashton, Lucy Richer
Commissioning Executive: Ayela Butt
Executive Producer: Rose Garnett
Produced by: Michael Elliott, Anita Overland
Archive Producers: Sam Dwyer, Zosia Alchimowicz
Line Producer: Deborah Aston
Associate Producers: Helen Bart, Susan, Charlotte Andrews
Production Co-ordinator: Jen McKeown
Production Accountant: Spencer Pawson
Supervising Location Manager: Rob Jones
Location Manager: Midge Ferguson
Post-production Supervisor: Emma Zee
1st Assistant Director: Richard T. Harris
2nd Assistant Director: Antonia Carter
Script Supervisor: Phoebe Billington
Casting by: Gary Davy
Screenplay by: Courtia Newland, Steve McQueen
Director of Photography: Shabier Kirchner
Stills Photographer: Will Robson Scott
Visual FX by: LipSync Post
Special Effects Supervisor: Scott McIntyre
Supervising Editor: Chris Dickens
Editors: Chris Dickens, Steve McQueen
Production Designer: Helen Scott
Supervising Art Director: Adam Marshall
Art Director: Philip A. Brown
Set Decorator: Hannah Spice
Graphic Designer: Oona Brown
Production Buyer: Aoife Flynn
Property Master: Jason Wood
Construction Manager: Jason Reilly
Costume Designer: Sinead Kidao
Hair and Make-up Designer: Jojo Williams
Title Design: Howard Watkins, Julia Hall, Tom Burke, Chloe Tetu
Titles by: LipSync Post
Digital Grading by: LipSync Post

Digital Colourist: Tom Poole
Music Supervisor: Ed Bailie, Abi Leland
Sound Mixer: Ronald Bailey
Re-recording Mixers: Paul Cotterell, James Harrison
Dialogue Editor: Paul Cotterell
Sound Effects Editor: James Harrison
Stunt Co-ordinators: Tom Lucy, Nrinder Dhudwar
Writers Room Special Consultant: Alex Wheatle
Consultants: Paul Gilroy, Leroy Logan
Dialect Coach: Hazel Holder

Cast

John Boyega (*Leroy Logan*)
Steve Toussaint (*Kenneth Logan*)
Neal Barry (*desk sergeant*)
Jack Bence (*Taylor*)
Stephen Boxer (*chief inspector*)
Nicholas Burns (*Mr Purling*)
Calum Callaghan (*Beck*)
Seroa Davis (*Hyacinth*)
Liam Garrigan (*Greg Huggan*)
Lorna Gayle (*Linda*)
Joshua Hill (*PC May*)
John Hodgkinson (*police interviewer*)
Tyrone Huntley (*Leee*)
Conor Lawson (*David*)
Tom Mahy (*PC Trent*)
Nadine Marshall (*Jesse*)
Neil Maskell (*Inspector Willis*)
Steve Nicholson (*drill inspector*)
Tut Nyuot (*Abraham*)
Samuel Oatley (*PC Cooper*)
Jaden Oshenye (*Leee at 14 years old*)
Ciarán Owens (*senior officer*)
Cory Peterson (*Philford*)
Joy Richardson (*Mrs Logan*)
Eddie Joe Robinson (*PC Millar*)
Mark Stanley (*Ed Harrigan*)
Jim Sturgeon (*class instructor*)
Antonia Thomas (*Gretl*)
Steve Toussaint (*Kenneth Logan*)
Nathan Vidal (*Leroy at 14 years old*)
Assad Zaman (*Asif*)

UK 2020
80 mins

SMALL AXE

A COLLECTION OF FIVE FILMS

Mangrove + Q&A with director Steve McQueen and Small Axe Consultant Paul Gilroy

Fri 22 Oct 17:30

Lovers Rock + Q&A with director Steve McQueen and actor Dennis Bovell

Fri 22 Oct 20:50

Sonic Cinema Presents: Lovers Rock After Party

Fri 22 Oct (Spiritland in Royal Festival Hall) 22:00-02:00

Talk: The Making of Small Axe with Steve McQueen, Tracey Scoffield, David Tanner and guests

Sat 23 Oct 16:00

Red, White and Blue

Sat 23 Oct 18:30

Alex Wheatle

Sat 23 Oct 20:45

Education

Sun 24 Oct 18:10

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