

Twenty years later, the menacing energy of ‘Training Day’ still reverberates



By [Jason Jones](#) Oct 5, 2021  10 

“I’m the police! I run shit here, you just live here! ... King Kong ain’t got shit on me!”

It was at this moment that those who feared Detective Alonzo Harris were also tired of his antics. Those living in the notorious “Jungles” area — run by the Black P. Stones (Bloods) — who didn’t have the power to fight back simply walked away from their tormentor, who performed only surface-level charity as a means of controlling those whom he swore to protect and serve. Moments later, Harris was murdered by mobsters who were bigger bullies than he, ending the film “Training Day,” in which Harris showed naive officer Jake Hoyt the ins-and-outs griminess of a twisted version of law and order. Hoyt simply wanted to make detective, and being part of this unit would put him on the fast track to that promotion, but at what cost? It’s a question that’s likely been asked among the LAPD plenty.

Denzel Washington’s portrayal of a twisted cop in “Training Day” not only won him his first Academy Award for best actor but also shed a light on corruption in the LAPD that had been uncovered by the Rampart scandal. Harris was the leader of an

elite undercover unit, much like Rampart's Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) unit that was the focus of the scandal that Rafael Perez became the face of after he confessed to crimes he and other officers committed, including stealing drugs and money.

The film, written by David Ayer and directed by Antoine Fuqua, was released 20 years ago today. Harris remains one of Washington's most memorable characters in his legendary career and resonated in a way other films about police corruption had not, in part due to its focus on the LAPD. Ayer, a White man who grew up in South Central Los Angeles, [finished the first draft](#) of the film in December 1995, three years before Perez was busted for stealing cocaine from a police evidence locker. Momentum for the film picked up following Perez's arrest.

Rampart came about six years after the Rodney King verdict led to civil unrest in April 1992. Still, there was a feeling it was wrong to question the police and their narratives, but biases existed before Perez's arrest. Dr. Renford Reese, a professor in the political science department at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, notes bias begins with how law enforcement writes the initial police report.

It's how a White kid who steals a purse is viewed as someone who went too far having fun and needs a warning. A Black kid in the same predicament is labeled a menace to society in need of stern punishment. The bias from Rampart wasn't new, but it exposed how "good cops" lauded for cleaning up the streets at all costs would stoop to low levels in the name of fighting crime. Perez and other Rampart officers were "good" at their jobs but rotten in how they abused their power, and Rampart forced society to see that citizens' complaints about crooked cops weren't fairy tales.

Washington was the perfect actor to portray Harris. There had to be swagger to Harris, a reason to explain how a good cop goes bad and the justifications behind breaking the law. Washington's portrayal showed the allure of law enforcement that rewarded a clean-up-the-streets-at-all-cost mentality and the vices that contributed to the corruption that engulfed the LAPD.

The strength of Washington's acting made one love and hate Harris simultaneously. The first time I saw the film, I left the theater thinking I almost wanted to be a part of the LAPD if I could capture the charm of Harris minus the sleaziness of his job.

“Denzel did what he does best. He comes in and he dominates and he leaves you laid out, and that’s what he did in ‘Training Day,’” said Kelley L. Carter, senior entertainment writer for The Undeclared.

When Washington delivered the performance that won him an Oscar, some critics didn’t like that he would receive Hollywood’s highest honor for an actor by playing a dirty cop who terrorized the community. But that shouldn’t overshadow the importance of Washington painting a picture of unscrupulousness in the LAPD.

“It depicted somebody who was bad but cool at the same time and who was really a gangster,” Dr. Renford Reese said. “When guys want to go out and gangbang and do all the dirt in the streets, you see the same thing, but with a guy on the opposite side who is wearing a blue uniform or representing blue.”

Reese is the author of several books, including “Leadership in the LAPD: Walking the Tightrope” and “American Paradox: Young Black Men.” He uses “Training Day” as part of his curriculum. Having seen the movie at least 20 times and with his deep research into the LAPD, Reese is uniquely qualified to delve into what the film means in 2021.

“For a brother, that’s real, that’s the type of stuff that would, ironically and paradoxically, make the police attractive to somebody who is a gang member, because the lines between a gangster and the police is blurred in this film,” Reese said. “And Harris is a romanticized view of the police for somebody on the streets.”

Part of Harris’ appeal in the movie was the suaveness of Washington that comes across on the screen. He wasn’t the typical pop culture cop. He was, as the Hillside Trece gangsters in the film called him, a “ruthless vato.”

Along the way, Harris was teaching Hoyt the right way to do the wrong things. Take off that wedding band — it’s a sign of weakness. Owe the Russian mob \$1 million? Kill off your old buddy Roger and steal his \$3 million. No search warrant? The menu from the Chinese restaurant will do. All is fair when you’re the LAPD. When Hoyt questions Harris’ tactics, he’s told 15,000 years’ worth of incarcerations has been handed down based on Harris’ investigations. But as Rampart showed us, convictions don’t always equate to justice. And like Perez in real life, piling up arrests and honors keeps the watchdogs from asking questions.

There's also Harris' acknowledgment that he used to be like Hoyt — wanting to do things by the book — but learned getting his hands dirty would earn him trust in a corrupt system. It's why he meets with “The Three Wise Men,” who are power brokers in the justice system. They're crooked and trust Harris with their dirty secrets because of his own indiscretions. It's also why Harris convinces Hoyt to smoke the cannabis confiscated from White teenagers in the neighborhood, knowing it was laced with PCP — so when Hoyt threatens to do the right thing, Harris can quickly remind him he'd fail a drug test and reeks of alcohol.

For Harris, it's a lesson in life on the beat: If you want to become a detective, listen to him, take the shortcuts. Money (legal and illegal) will follow, along with power.

If you have to shoot a suspect unjustly, so be it. If you have to manipulate the evidence and lie about suspects like [Perez did in real life](#), do it to get the job done. But it's clear Hoyt isn't all-in with the corruption, refusing his cut of dirty money, which then makes him a liability. He doesn't have dirt on his hands, so he has to go. Harris conspires with Hillside Trece to finish the job.

“That's when you see Harris has no redeemable qualities and he's rotten to the core,” Reese said. “Up until that point, in a twisted, perverted way, he makes sense. Roger's out here selling drugs to the youth; he wants to get this ‘maggot’ off the street, and that makes sense. It might be hard, it might be calloused, but if you think about it, you can say it makes sense.”

What also makes sense is the residents of the Jungles turning their back on Harris. The poor are accustomed to the likes of Harris and their exploitation. But when Harris asks the Bloods to kill Hoyt for a cash prize, he learns one rule of the streets he forgot: You put in your own work in the hood. The ethics of the street wouldn't allow them to do what even the dirty cop wouldn't do — kill Hoyt for seeking to bring Harris to justice. They know Harris never cared about them, and they don't care about Harris.

“He's not about Black power, he's not about brotherhood, he's not about the community,” Reese said. “He's about something that is sick, something that is sadistic, something that the Blacks in the Jungles cannot identify with. He's exploitative in a way that is hurtful, it's shameful, it's embarrassing, and you see that in the exchange between Harris and Bone. It's not about you being a Black cop; it's

about you coming in here and being exploitative, that you come in here representing a corrupt system, and we're tired of it.”

Carter was not surprised by Washington's performance. It was also important that the role came after the Rampart scandal, which saw convictions overturned and the incarcerated released after being sentenced on trumped-up charges. Washington put a face to police corruption in a film that was informative and entertaining. It's even been reported that Washington [grew a goatee to resemble Perez](#), adding another piece to make his role hit harder.

“Denzel is extremely intelligent and he's very learned,” Carter said. “He loves the news and he's aware of what's going on, so I wouldn't be surprised if that was one of the things he gravitated towards or made his role in the film attractive for him, I think, at the end of the day, because Denzel is really an actor's actor, and he's really a nerd of the craft.”



Washington accepts the Oscar for best actor during the 74th annual Academy Awards. (Kevork Djansezian / Associated Press)

Washington was so captivating that he won the best actor award that had eluded him for years. But winning the award for portraying a character like Harris evoked myriad emotions. Washington had been a symbol of excellence in the Black community,

playing some of the most iconic roles in film. Arguably the most notable was his performance in “Malcolm X,” but he lost to Al Pacino’s work in “Scent of a Woman.” Washington’s multiple snubs [has been a point of contention for years](#), and some argue winning for “Training Day” isn’t enough payback.

“What happens a lot of times in Hollywood is they make up for past mistakes,” Carter said. “And Denzel quite honestly should have won the Oscar for ‘Malcolm X.’ I think a lot of people feel that all these years later: That was a missed opportunity.”

Malcolm X isn’t my favorite role from Washington, even if it’s critically acclaimed as his best. Harris is my favorite because it put a face on one of the most important issues of my generation.

Perez worked security for Death Row Records — who wouldn’t want to roll with Death Row? Harris, with his jewelry hanging from his neck like he was about to drop his own mixtape, gave life to someone many people denied existed before Rampart. It might have been the timing of the film for me, but Alonzo Harris will always be my No. 1 character Washington played.

It’s the same kind of multilayered look at the gangster life that I loved when Washington played Frank Lucas in “American Gangster.” I’m a fan of biographical films, and I’m convinced Washington can make any complex character real. He can make people understand why someone takes the wrong path, why that person shouldn’t be hated and why there might be a little empathy for the circumstances that created said gangster.

I’ll also always be fond of Washington as Jake Shuttlesworth in “He Got Game” because it’s about a father trying to gain influence with his son. Shuttlesworth’s motives are to get his prison sentence reduced, but anyone who has had any kind of complicated relationship with their father could be angry with Shuttlesworth, but also feel the conflict of his son, Jesus, who is trying to make a college decision.

There are so many other roles Washington has played that have been sources of pride. Melvin B. Tolson in “The Great Debaters” is another historical figure Washington put on the screen as only he could. He does the same with fictional characters like Easy Rawlins in “Devil in a Blue Dress,” which is based off the book by literary giant Walter Mosley. I also enjoyed Washington in “The Book of Eli” as a badass post-apocalyptic fighter. Washington as attorney Joe Miller opposite Tom Hanks in

“Philadelphia” is also memorable. There are truly too many Washington roles to pick from without being able to find something that fits one’s cinematic tastes.

Carter said it would be hard to find a Washington fan who wouldn’t rank Malcolm X as their favorite role and acknowledged the emotional response related to the character, but said that doesn’t discount Washington’s acting in “Training Day.”

Washington as Malcolm X will always hold a special place for me. I was a high school freshman when the movie was released in November 1992, and like a lot of my peers (thanks to hip-hop) was searching for knowledge of self. I’d worn the Africa medallions in the late 1980s but was entering the stage of my life when I wanted to know more and was looking for answers to the questions I had as a young Black man. Washington gave life to a person I was learning more about in that quest for knowledge.

So I understand why there will always be an eye-roll when discussing why crooked Harris was the role that won Washington his best actor honor instead of recognizing the towering legacy of Malcolm X,

“Back then, we didn’t have a phrase that identified probably what really was happening. Right now we do,” Carter said. “I think a lot of that was respectability politics. We Black folks understand the power of media and presence and how we’re viewed in television and film and how that shapes how we’re viewed in real life. So I understand the argument and concern that Denzel has brought these icons to life, these Black icons, American heroes to life and didn’t win a big prize for that but in fact wins his big prize for playing a dirty cop. I understand why people outside of this space might feel that kind of way.”

That Alonzo Harris stirred up so much emotion is a testament to the job Washington and the cast did in bringing Ayer’s story to life under Fuqua’s direction. The timeliness of the movie certainly helped, too. Reese said in his study of films that “Training Day” offered an unsanitized view of police corruption other films lacked. It was the kind of storytelling someone like Fuqua had to be a part of, based on his [connections in Los Angeles](#).

“Oftentimes you have White directors and producers — they can’t do what Black directors and producers can do, the same with a Black actor,” Reese said. “The profuse use of the N-word in a way that was not formalized, it was street. That’s the

way guys talk, and it was the embrace of police officers wanting to be the illest, realest killers — that they wanted to be the ultimate gangster thugs. I think that captured the essence and the uniqueness of this film, to me, more than any other film that has depicted or reflected the police.”

For all those reasons, Washington deserved all the acclaim that came with “Training Day.” Critics will debate where it ranks in Washington’s career in his best roles. But Detective Alonzo Harris arrived at the right time to tell an important story. “That wasn’t a novelty award he won that year,” Carter said. “He won because he was excellent and he was the best person in that category to collect that prize. That was pretty much a foregone conclusion that Denzel was going to win the Academy Award that year, and he should have. I feel like Denzel has gifted us with so many great roles that just stick to you and they don’t leave you.”

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