



## Eddie Murphy copping a bad attitude

**Beverly Hills Cop II**

Directed by Tony Scott

By Pat Aufderheide

**E**DDIE MURPHY, WHOSE STARRING role in *Beverly Hills Cop* made that film the biggest grossing comedy in history, has long since passed from the category of comedian to phenomenon. Murphy, in league with mega-producers Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer, is on the beat again as the cop Axel Foley in *Beverly Hills Cop II*. This time, though, the game gets rough.

*Cop II* is a machine of pile-driving entertainment, directed with deadly force by Tony Scott (*Top Gun*). It's not only the car crashes—every car chase involves smash-ups that would slaughter in real life. It's also cinematography that offers eerie lyric takes on urban devastation, locks on to female thighs and buttocks as moving pin-ups, and fondles luxury objects pruriently. It's the editing-for-shock, keeping pace with the Giorgio Moroder-meets-Motown style music (just flash on the theme song and you've got it).

This is not merely viewer-assault; it's a concept. As Scott told the *New York Times*, he was looking for "an energy fix," by "trying to pull the audience in two directions, to exhaust the audience by manipulating it...so that when the humor comes it is almost a sense of relief."

**High and low society:** One consequence is a plot (to which Eddie Murphy contributed) so baroquely complex that it's impossible to follow, involving oil wells, gun-running and high society. The

plot does carefully bring back several characters from the original. Axel's modus operandi has little to do with solving the crime and everything to do with making sure Murphy's the punchline to the incident.

Murphy's assumed a heavy challenge in competing with car pile-ups for our attention, but he lowers himself to the job with a combination of scatological and crudely misogynist gambits—the same

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principle that boosted ratings for shock-jock radio. The shit jokes run through the film like a sewer, and so do epithets like "bitch" and other locker-room references to women. Murphy, however, leavens the crudity by raising his own eyebrows at it, as if in surprise that a basically nice boy from the 'burbs like himself could be so outrageous.

The film's structure abets him. Murphy's self-portrayal as a grown-up middle-class adolescent takes place within a story about adolescent will triumphing over authority—particularly the stodgy authority of police bureaucracy, with the kick being that the adolescent renegade wears a badge. Of course, being a boy's adventure story, the plot builds in the brutal misogyny (Brigitte Nielsen, Sly Stallone's body-builder wife, plays the villainess).

**Super-adolescents:** We may be getting used to stories of super-adolescents for whom mayhem is heroism; Rambo already carved that icon in muscle, and the *Ghostbusters* crowd in fast-food

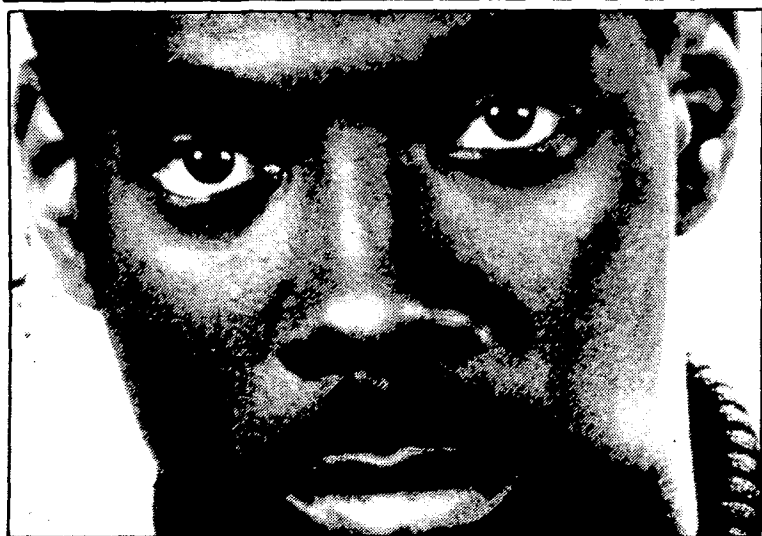
flab. But Murphy is a black comic, and that makes a difference. Some of Murphy's humor draws on the lowest common denominator of pee-pee, doo-doo jokes, and banana-peel pratfalls, a timeless source of explosive laughter. But in race-conscious America, no black comic can escape the fact of being black. Murphy's solution is to ground his humor in cheap exploitation of racial stereotypes, both black and white.

Playing a series of images drawn from white stereotypes of blacks, he launches them, in the *Beverly Hills Cop* movies, against black stereotypes of whites. There's no trace of underlying irony, no sign

of the compelling desire to see and be seen beyond stereotype that always gave Richard Pryor's (or Lenny Bruce's) humor power. It's a centerless, spoof job that becomes a sly joke on those troubled by the realities that stereotypes reflect in their distorted way.

Axel's the hip one, not just because he's adept and outrageous, but because he draws on black street experience. He keeps saying to his dumbfounded white sidekicks, "I didn't always used to be a cop, you know." What he used to be, presumably, is a street punk, where he might have learned how to jam a security system. But that's not where he learned the man-

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nerisms to deceive the endlessly gullible white middle-class of secretaries, bumbling bureaucrats and incompetent cops when he pretends to be a jive pool cleaner or a rolling-eyes-craven delivery boy, or a pimp. He got those images where we got them, from mass media, like the Amos & Andy imitation he uses on his answering machine.

**Spooking whitey:** Yet somehow this ex-street tough also seems to have graduated from some suburban high school (which Murphy actually did), and one where he got used to having only white friends. When he's done spooking whitey, he relaxes with him (and I do mean him). In his letter jacket Murphy cops a speaking style and genial stance that could come right out of a John Hughes teen movie. The threat of those dread bad-black images dissipates into the familiarity of the generic juvenile lead of the '80s.

There's something plastic about Murphy, so adept at playing roles but so blithely empty at the core. Think about his peculiar asexuality. Traces of gay gentility (also stereotypical) thread through his performance, here as in *Cop I*. And his relationship to women is carefully limited. He admires body parts with the best of them, but his only female friends (in the first film, his college buddy, in this film the daughter of his murdered cop friend) are sister-types, and they're white.

Murphy is the neutered version of blaxploitation hero of *Sweet Sweetback's Badass Song* or *Shaft*. He's crossed them with Michael J. Fox, and turned himself into the crossover black hero for a culture where image is everything. He can titillate with expert imitations of the blacks whites fear—that young tough black street kid, the hustler, the criminal—and then dismiss them as a joke. The part he returns to as an anchor for the Axel character is the generic male teenager. The same kind that's terrified of and hostile toward women, thrilled by guns, in opposition to authority and in love with clothes. That teenager.

*Beverly Hills Cop II* provides a glistening machine for Murphy to drive in. And he's a cool hand at the wheel; anybody who could compete successfully with that much visual technique has to be good. But where's he going? The smug self-satisfaction shows through in his performance, matching the glossy high-sensationalism of the film's action-packed execution. You can't help laughing at moments in *Beverly Hills Cop II*, and it's undoubtedly bound for box-office glory at a time when we need a lot of noise to distract us from the mess of everyday life. But ultimately the joke's on us. ■

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**Rosa Luxemburg**  
Directed by Margarethe von Trotta

By Ed Morales

## Rosa Luxemburg, wildflower of revolt

IN TELLING THE STORY OF ROSA LUXEMBURG, the Polish-born political activist of turn-of-the-century Germany, filmmaker Margarethe von Trotta has chosen an ambitious project for a two-hour film. Luxemburg once commented, "I was accidentally conscripted into the ferment of history, but really was born simply to tend geese." The film constantly reaffirms this self-description, giving us Rosa as fiery-upstart-cum-doting-gardener, rallying a crowd of workers as passionately as she reassures her cat.

The apparent contradiction between Rosa's inner desire for blissful domesticity, her quiet love of the natural world and her outer life

of tumultuous political conflict is what von Trotta attempts to resolve in the film. Given its subtext that the Marxist ideologues of the time were losing touch with the "spontaneity of the proletariat," Luxemburg is shown struggling against the bureaucratization of socialist politics. The anguish she suffers as a woman is suggested as enabling her to retain an authentic identification with the working class, transcending her bourgeois education, perhaps in a way her male counterparts could not.

Though responsible for orthodox Marxian work like *The Accumula-*

*tion of Capital*, Rosa is often seen here as peace activist, presumably to strike an ironic note in view of the current situation in Western Europe. Yet von Trotta skillfully includes her theoretical disagreements with the revisionism of the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

In a colorful early scene at a New Year's Eve costume party, the evolutionary Socialist Edouard Bernstein is dressed in a clown suit. Rosa refuses to dance with him, unwilling to compromise even in this frivolous instance. Karl Kautsky is at first her mentor, but ultimately bears the full brunt of her critical wrath when he fails to reject the

pro-war policies of the SPD.

Barbara Sukowa, who has shown remarkable flexibility in her portrayal of Fassbinder's whores (*Lola, Berlin Alexanderplatz*) and von Trotta's revolutionaries (*Marianne and Julianne, Rosa*), is thoroughly

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convincing as the valiant Rosa, hobbling around on a leg lame since childhood.

During lengthy prison stretches, Sukowa subtly allows us to see Rosa struggling to maintain her resolve as she is weakened by the news of the death of a young lover. Though straining a bit during the sequences depicting her ill-fated romance with Leo Jogiches, she evokes the essence of Luxemburg's power at the podium in riveting fashion.

Why was this seemingly fragile and introspective woman feared as the infamous "Red Rosa" by the political establishment? Von Trotta makes sure we know Luxemburg was motivated not just by pure pacifism, but a desire to keep the international workers' movement intact. In a scene with a sympathetic prison guard, she snaps, "They've changed the slogan to 'Workers of the world unite in peacetime, but in war—slit each other's throats!'"

In the end, she was a victim of terrible violence herself, martyred by the first stirring of German fascism. Having since occupied an uncertain niche in her adopted country's history, Rosa is effectively revived in this moving and well-executed film as a glowing example of Marxism with a human face. ■

Ed Morales is a New York-based writer.

## The Times

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*Conspiracy: Radicalism on Trial in Nevada.* "Grave errors were made," said Gov. Dick Bryan, pardons board chairman. But then, if you look at it from the mineowner's point of view, those guys were agitators, and probably refused to leave town like the Honduran priest. What were those beleaguered tycoons supposed to do? All those menacing Wobblie peasants! That must be it. But they're pardoned now, so everything's OK, right?

It isn't the *New York Times* stories alone that do me in, even in conjunction with my reduced dose of caffeine. It's the fear and rage they produce, accompanied by the desire to do something, and the hopeless feeling that there's nothing to be done. I'm no psychotherapist, but I think the anxiety is not just the result of my half-a-tiny-cup of coffee.

And that brings me to the Op-Ed page: three separate and apparently unrelated pieces. Flora Lewis writes on "The Guilt of Doing Nothing." The Anthony Lewis column is "The Most Cruel." And Ray Bonner's imperative headline is "Aquino Must Address Filipinos' Poverty."

"The Guilt of Doing Nothing" is on the Klaus Barbie trial, the purpose of which, Flora Lewis writes, is "to keep memory alive so the crimes may never be allowed to happen again." As though, I think, large-scale crimes against whole groups of people are all in the past, are "history." As though it was only in the '30s and '40s that whole populations stood silently by, knew and shrugged. As if, as Ms. Lewis says, this will probably be the last big war criminal trial in the West, "a gripping history lesson for those too young to remember, those who have forgotten, and those who never wanted to know." As if we think that those kinds of crimes, or the crime of unjustifiable war, is over, is historical, and the Nazis' plan to rid Germany of Jews is totally different from the North American desire to rid, not itself, but its southern neighbors of the dread (Commie) menace.

As if we alone have a sacred mandate, and can without guilt send the priest out of town, and shoot the volunteer who went to help build dams and bring the miracle of electricity to a Nicaraguan village. And why didn't they have electricity? This is the late 20th century, and our neighbors don't even have

electricity? What kind of neighbors are we, anyway? That was Anthony Lewis's subject, the death of a young American engineer, a volunteer in Nicaragua, one of those people who knew but didn't shrug, who decided to do something simple and profound like help the neighbors into the 20th century, even if it was dangerous. And it was definitely dangerous. He's dead.

**A congressional non-hearing:** At the congressional hearing on the incident his parents took the witness stand. The facts were reviewed. "On April 28 he was out looking at a nearby stream, planning to dam it and generate electricity for the village. The autopsy report said he was first injured in the legs, then killed with a shot to the head from less than two feet away. There were gunpowder burns on his face."

"They blew his brains out at point-blank range as he lay wounded," his father told the committee. "I consider the U.S. government, and its effectors, the contras, guilty of this crime. This is murder." Columnist Lewis tells how a member of the committee (Connie Mack [R-FL]) rounded on Mr. and Mrs. Linder, suggesting that they had not allowed an appropriate time to grieve for their son before trying to do something about the policy that led to his death. Why rush? Remember



those guys in Nevada? Maybe it took 80 years, but in the end they got that pardon!

Mack was unable to understand how the parents could "use" (my quotes) the grief they feel to politicize the situation. He said he thought they were "asking for it," that they'd come too soon, less than three weeks since the death of their son. Columnist Lewis was listening to a National Public Radio tape of the episode, on which he heard in the background, Benjamin's mother, Mrs. Linder, speaking with disbelief.

"Asked for it?" she said. "That is the most cruel thing you could have said."

But no, Mack was not going to concede cruelty. He didn't consider it cruel, telling the parents their son *had* asked for it, that point-blank bullet. And then Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Elliott Abrams spoke soothing words, telling the hearing that Benjamin Linder's death was "a tragedy which need not have occurred." If only Nicaragua hadn't allowed Americans into the combat zone. Those appalling Nicaraguans, trying to provide light for their peasants.

**Combat-zone flashback:** My thoughts flash backward. If only the Americans hadn't supported the corrupt Somoza regime for so many decades. If only the Nicaraguans hadn't

### Reading between the lines of the morning *New York Times*.

been among the poorest of the poor countries of this hemisphere. If only they'd had electricity long ago, Benjamin Linder's brains would still be intact, working on some more space-age late-'80s problem than trying to help Nicaragua out of the dark ages, and getting shot point-blank for being there trying. "It was a combat zone!" Abrams said.

Which brings me to the piece on Aquino and the need to address Filipino poverty. The history—again—is pertinent. The enemy—again—is the Commies. Or *is* it the Commies? Three decades ago, the U.S. launched one of its first counterinsurgency wars in the Philippines. A covert campaign considered successful at the time, it was designed to stamp out the community menace.

But recently, even as covert operations in Central America are being scrutinized by Congress and a special prosecutor, President Reagan, "our" president (my quotes), has reportedly signed a "finding" authorizing increased covert activity by the CIA in that beleaguered nation, says Ray Bonner. Unfortunately, Aquino has not found a way to change things in her country, where two-thirds of the population live in rural (unlit) poverty. What happened to the promises of land reform and redistribution? Mrs. Aquino, a member of one of the country's wealthiest clans, has not bit the bullet. She would have to go against her friends and her class, said

a Filipino journalist.

**The CIA knows the score:** So nothing changes. The U.S. general who led the counterinsurgency in the '50s noted at the time that the Philippines had "a government of the privileged few, not of the people." Those few probably had exquisite lamps or chandeliers lighting up their spacious homes. As for the rest of the nation—even in the '60s the CIA in a secret national intelligence estimate observed that the country was beset by "land hunger in the countryside, unemployment in the cities and a grinding poverty for the overwhelming majority of the people." Without a program to address these basic problems, the CIA concluded, "nationalism and discontent are likely to lend themselves to leftist exploitation."

It must be pretty discouraging for the CIA, and Mrs. Aquino, too. What's to be done about all those peasants? Why do they need electricity anyway? Why don't they just go to bed early, so they'll be wide awake and eager to work their lord's holdings in the morning? Nobody ever says so out loud, but if you think about it those Nazis really had quite the solution to the problem of large groups of troublesome folks. How much more peaceful the world would be without all these agitated masses of dirty peasants, clamoring for food, looking for land, susceptible to menacing leftist propaganda luring them with promises of literacy and electric generators. But no, that type of solution is now commonly acknowledged as being in the "crimes against humanity" category. That's all in the past. That was then. This is now. We've learned our lessons from history and the last "real" war.

It's May 15, 1987. Today's *New York Times* tells us: troops and jets and helicopters and landing strips and warships are all in place. Reporter James LeMoyné, who's been there and knows, says the exercises appear to reflect a growing American ability to send combat forces to Central America. And maintain them there. U.S. officials acknowledge, we are now prepared for invasion.

"We"? (my quotes) "Our" government? (my quotes). My anxiety level rises. The terrible impotence and guilt of doing nothing, the rage at reading of the most cruel things being done in our names—it's intolerable. My hand is trembling as I write.

Maybe if I gave up coffee completely.... ■  
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