Hood Dreams: Black Youth and Organized Sports

Current NBA players like Kobe Bryant and LeBron James have established themselves as masters of the game. What ties these two great players together? They never spent time in college, belonging to an elite number of superstar basketball players who opted to enter NBA upon graduating high school. The documentary *Hoop Dreams* (1994) explores the phenomenon of ghetto children being sold on the dream of professional sports. *Hoop Dreams* uncovers the exploitation of African-American youth in organized sports by documenting the lives of two urban African-American boys dreaming to play in the NBA. In this documentary the inner workings of multiple institutions are exposed such as recruiting practices, commodification of talent, and the dynamics of public education within the urban setting through the effective use of direct cinema. The film's point of view leads viewers believe that, although problematic, organized sports gives chances and opportunities to disenfranchised youth to get themselves out of the hood.

Every documentary film falls into one of six categories or modes of documentaries. In this documentary, it mixes participatory and observational modes. *Hoop Dreams*, can be categorized under the participatory mode of documentary because the documentary puts greats emphasis on the interaction between the filmmaker and the subjects especially through the means of interviews or any form of direct involvement (Nichols 34). Remaining with their subjects for an extended period of time allows the documentarian to make sense of all the institutions at work.
in the ghetto. Though the documentarian does not appear in the film, their presence is implied through the interviews. *Hoop Dreams* relies on interviews to add points of view and commentary that goes on their subjects lives such as interviews with the subjects themselves, their parents and family, and to their coaches. But the ethical question has been raised how the impact of documentarian's presence for over five years has shaped the boys' lives. Its observational too because it “emphasizes a direct engagement with the everyday life of subjects as observed by an unobtrusive camera” (Nichols 34). Nichols is saying that in the observational documentary is like an anthropologist at work because the documentarian/anthropologist stays with a certain group for an extended period of time to study their ways. They do not try to instigate action because Nichols says again, “we look in on life as it is lived. Social actors engage with one another, ignoring the filmmakers. Often the characters are caught up in pressing demands or a crisis of their own…and [it] draws away from the presence of filmmakers” (Nichols 111). None of the crucial scenes are set up just for the camera such as Arthur's father participating in a drug deal in the background of the schoolyard basketball court. Using observational and participatory modes, the documentarian does not appear on camera and remains an observer, but the makers also participate in this documentary because the subjects are talking off screen to someone behind the camera. However, everything but the interviews is observational. For example, during basketball games the camera shows captures shots of the crowd, the score and full shots of the subjects, giving a sense of context in the observational documentary. Then having the subjects talk off camera to someone acknowledges the presence of a camera, so its participatory. In an article by Roger Ebert titled “Hoop Dreams”, Ebert expresses that this documentary film was based on two levels by addressing the story behind the people and the larger issue of value structures. “On one
level, a documentary about two black kids named William Gates and Arthur Agee, from Chicago's inner city, who are gifted basketball players and dream of someday starring in the NBA. On another level, it is about much larger subjects: about ambition, competition, race and class in our society. About our value structures” (Ebert). This quote from the article by Robert Ebert reflects the idea that the film's modes of documentary reveal these underlying themes. The second level all ties into the dreams of Black youth in the inner city, which I will discuss later. Without the observational mode, the impact of the institutions at work including the sports companies ready to ponce wouldn't be around and explore the depth of poverty and lack of community in the ghetto.

This film also serves as history because of the visual and audible evidence that corresponds to the real world, but its really how they were represented by the documentarian in a moment of time. In a *Variety* article, writer Todd McCarthy writes:

> By keeping their cameras in close over such a long period, however, the filmmakers have also rendered a remarkable portrait of growing up in the city today, of the fragility and resilience of the family, of the difficulty of escaping the ghettos and projects, of the negative pressures on decent people applied by society and criminality, of the perception of successful athletes as something other than normal human beings. (Mccarthy: Variety)

What he's saying here is that because there is a high index to reality of documentary, the images and scenes on screen aren't fabricated, but an actual in-depth look at how bad things are in the ghetto. When in reality, those images of despair are arranged by the documentarian. Though, really close to the truth, the documentary by design is merely a re-presentation of reality. On screen the boys wanted to go to the NBA and the documentary only showed that. Scenes in the
classroom were always spun under collegiate requirements to maintain a certain GPA as well as
good test scores. The documentarian re-presents reality closer to the subject's version of reality
because of the context doesn't allow a far-fetched version of reality. Though they might have not
collaborated together with their subjects to produce the documentary, the film was well received
because the reality and history both line up. Sixteen years later, things haven't changed much
when it comes to African-American youth trying to enter the realm of professional sports.
Wishful thinking plays a huge part in how the youth are willing to be exploited.

The direct cinema technique exposed the exploitation in the inner-city. The shots of the
skyscraper projects and dilapidated schoolyards lets the viewer into the claustrophobic ghetto.
Because of the shot choices and angles, the audience allows the documentarian to explain what
its like to live in the setting through the boys and their families. Allowing the audience to relate
to the certain characters portrayed in the film, ties back into how in this specific documentary
stresses the actual, lived encounter between filmmaker and the specific subjects brings out the
truth about the specific situation rather than a typical reenactment where the audience can not
relate to (Nichols 117). The camera is in the backseat of one of the local recruiters, Earl Smith,
who by trade is an under-the-table talent scout for local private high schools. Earl, shown in the
darkness of his car reflects the shadiness of his operation. This scene helps the audience realize
how much of an industry it is to recruit the talent of young ghetto boys to play for their school
and how they've merely become a commodity. While at the private high school, Arthur and Will
have simply run out of money to cover the tuition. Here the commodification of talent occurs too
because the private school simply chose which one would be more valuable to their program and
at that time it was Will. To ensure their success as a high school basketball team, Will worked for
the school's largest private donor, Encyclopedia Britannica, so his tuition would be covered. On the corporate level Nike sponsored an All-American basketball camp for high school players and college coaches. Through direct cinema, Spike Lee gives a monologue on how the young men at the camp must be conscious of their exploitation by the big companies.

This documentary helps make sense out of class issues and the influx of African-American youth over the last thirty years. Dr. Harry Edwards, sociology professor at UC Berkeley, says that “the youth are not exploited by the system, but professional sports offers not a ticket out of the hood, but the opportunity to get out” (Leonard, www.sportbusinessisms.com). Being in a large urban center like south side Chicago, where unemployment and poverty is high, there is not much opportunity for black folks to work. Harry Edwards argues that the prison-industrial complex is actually degrading the talent that is already out there. By not giving the children opportunities to play sports, they will fall into prison or deviant behavior. “Given what is happening to young black people, who have essentially disconnected from virtually every institutional structure in society, sports may be our last hook and handle” (Leonard, www.sportbusinessisms.com). He's saying that sports is one of the few things that are saving the black community. Unemployment and gang involvement has crippled the young black youth and that includes aspiring black athletes and other professionals. But as pictured in documentary, Arthur and Will follow along the lines John Hoberman advances in his book *Darwin's Athletes*. He says “that the saturation of black athletes in major American sports has trickled down to black youth to feel that they are superior to most athletes, encouraging their sacrifice of education and other pursuits for NBA goals” (Hoberman 4). Arthur believes too much in his skills and the people around him were convinced too, that he was no doubt an eventual NBA player. Will
figures how hard it really is to play at a top tier NCAA basketball program while tending to his girlfriend and daughter and studies. He drops basketball, and pursues a degree in Communications, though upon graduation and returning to Chicago, he finds the reality of the situation in the first place: there aren’t any jobs in Chicago (Davis, SportsIllustrated). This leads me to the position about the current NBA policy on the ban on high school players entering the draft.

Current NBA policy bans potential players at the age of 19 in addition to being at least one year removed from high school. Though the policy has an economical impact on those wishing to leave high school at a moments notice, it doesn’t necessarily make the dream any less attainable. Policy is aimed to curb the amount of youth who do not make it to the all-star games. Out of the those drafted in the past, only a handful have lasted a long period of time and have made good careers (Nance, USA Today). In relation to Hoop Dreams, the policy encourages aspiring NBA players to go to college even for a year. But it still brings it all back to the problems of the institutions at play, “Aside from the church, there are no 'mediating institutions' to serve the social needs of the population, no organizations to soften the blows of poverty while also ensuring that the poor are equipped to become functioning members of society.” (Gerson). Just like William, there's still the poor problems that happen in the ghetto. The NBA could get you and maybe your family out, but there's still a system in place that Hoop Dreams revealed.
Works Cited


