

# BLACK COP

(Dir. Cory Bowles, 2017 – 91mins)

By Chelsea Phillips-Carr

We know the context. There is an epidemic of racism, black people are being killed by the police without consequences, and white supremacy is on the rise. With *Black Cop*, director Cory Bowles viscerally provokes us to confront what is happening in society, in a way that refuses to let audiences back down or make excuses. In Bowles' feature debut, Ronnie Rowe Jr. stars as the titular cop who is made to rethink his position within law enforcement after he himself is racially profiled by a fellow officer. Fully from the perspective of Rowe's character, the event acts as a catalyst for redefining power, progress, and accountability.

An incredibly deliberate film, *Black Cop* is a narrative with purpose. In challenging our ideas about police violence, Bowles is laser-focused, wasting no time and leaving no space for ambiguity. Rowe's character experiences a cognitive shift when he is nearly arrested for, ultimately, wearing a hoodie at night. Deep within a discourse of racist violence, his actions reverse the situation, exploiting his position as a law enforcer to attack white people in the exact same way black people have been systematically brutalized for centuries.

We watch as "respectable" white people encounter a police officer without fear, meeting his dominance and irrationality with self-righteousness, and we are made aware of the starkly different ways in which we engage with law enforcement based on race. When these white civilians are wrongly treated, aggressively, with suspicion, anger, and judgement, we hear people discuss the real-life situation: "If you obey the police it doesn't usually happen." "Realise that you can't resist arrest." "If you're not doing anything unlawful, then you shouldn't have anything to worry about." This implicit trust – presented as objectively non-racist – of white police officers in the face of racialized violence, becomes the soundtrack to police brutality against white people.

With his film, Bowles is playing devil's advocate. Holding up a mirror up to the problem, we see the viciousness of police violence, presented in new terms. Putting together the racist valuing of both police officers and white people, *Black Cop* ensures the two ideals cannot exist simultaneously, forcing us to question how, why, and when we give the benefit of the doubt to attackers or victims. Yet the film isn't about a brash counterpoint: Bowles is not advocating for police violence to simply be reversed, or for revenge against white people to be the answer.

Using footage from body-cams, dashboard-cams, and cellphones, the images of *Black Cop* are constantly distorted and changing, amongst a landscape characterized by cold, grey tones punctuated by sour pops of yellow and green. The city, the cop's domain, is perpetually ugly, uncomfortable, and uncertain. There is no beauty to his actions, or what drove him to them, and he knows it, as he experiences increasing emotional distress over the violence he inflicts. *Black Cop* is a provocative satire, with its depiction of violence against white people making a powerful, biting commentary. But Bowles' film is astute in its examination of police violence, and never about being simply a snappy comeback to discourse around institutional racism.

In an early scene, a different police officer expresses anger when a white male cop jokingly spouts Islamophobic rhetoric before recanting. Facing the camera straight on, she tells us: "If you claim that you don't support something, challenge it." This is exactly what Bowles is doing. With the humour and shock is sensitivity and urgency in discussing police violence against black people. Using its clever role-reversal as an entry into this conversation, *Black Cop* is a necessary and bold film which entices audiences to change their perspective through both blunt satire and thoughtful questioning.