

In *Fear & Loathing In Las Vegas* Raoul Duke says to Doctor Gonzo "We came out here to find the American Dream, and now that we're right in the vortex you want to quit ... You must realize that we've found the main nerve". To which Gonzo replies "I know. That's what gives me the Fear". The myth and power of the American Dream looms large, shapeshifting from the toxicities of Manifest Destiny and Make America Great Again to more subtle hopes and opportunities that better lives await those who graft and stay true to the nebulous concept of the American spirit. It's a powerful lure because it promises so much for those that are born within US borders and those who broach them from abroad, both who have so little. It is premised on freedom but the danger is that it's illusory, chameleonic and for many groups, unobtainable.

Barry Jenkins' sublime 2018 film, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, focuses on people for whom the danger is all too real in sometimes direct and sometimes insidious ways. The characters simply want the freedom to choose how to live, unaffected by systematic dictates. The film, an adaptation of the James Baldwin novel, pivots on the crushing reality that for black Americans it doesn't matter how good or 'respectable' you are, or how simple your ambitions – in this case just to have a family and sculpt - you are still regarded as lesser and your freedom can be wrenched away at any time, despite the story taking place long after the supposed setting of the slavery sun. The characters come face to face with the hypocrisy of American ideals and that the promises they've been given are lies. This comes as no surprise to any of the characters but the admittance of long, deeply realised and suspected truths comes with deep sadness and powerful resonance for audiences. Therein lies a central paradox of the American Dream. It's a lie. One people know to be a lie but chase anyway. It's a game.

Do You Believe We Gon' Make It?

For the characters in *If Beale Street Could Talk* knowledge of the game is carried in their bones. Ta-Nehisi Coates writes in *The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration* that 'for African Americans, unfreedom is the historical norm'. For all the black characters in the film their existence in the world is always conditional on an acceptance of their position in the social order. This is deeply felt through Tish and Fonny as it's their love story that sits at the heart of the narrative. Acceptance is based on navigating a variety of daily, ritual aggressions as beautifully illustrated by a sequence where Tish recounts her experiences working on the perfume counter at a department store and elucidates on the differences between black and white male customers. At the other end of the spectrum are the deeper structural transgressions such as how pressure can be applied to black men who are recently out of prison and female victims of rape by the police to get their desired outcome - the film deftly contains commentary on the burden on women societally, culturally and physically - or what a chance meeting with the police can mean in the moment or later on.

Jenkins structures the narrative in non-linear fashion, jumping between the past, Tish and Fonny together and starting their adult life simpatico, and the present, Fonny awaiting trial for a rape he is innocent of and Tish and their families working to get him out. The way the film reveals the events that lead to the knowledge of how Fonny ends up in jail is masterful. Due to Jenkins' construction the white cop antagonist doesn't turn up in the story until around 35 minutes in, giving Fonny and Tish the chance to elicit understanding and sympathy, but also to enjoy life free from the

horror of what is happening. Of course in some sense, the cop doesn't need to turn up earlier, his symbolic presence as a tool of white supremacy hangs over everything in the film and the lives of the lovers as black people. Ta-Nehisi Coates writes that through working on pieces that saw him delve deep into ideas around reparations and the American prison system he was able to clearly understand a history where 'to be black in America was to be plundered. To be white was to benefit from, and at times directly execute, this plunder.' The early parts of the film place it in a lineage, not only with Baldwin, but also black 20th and 21st century art and life in a wider context. There are stark and powerful images in the form of still photographs depicting police brutality and racial oppression in American cities, linking these fictional characters to an all too real history and present. This is not a film unmasking a lie, it's a film that reaffirms the lie, bringing together literature, photography and cinema to make that reaffirmation. Jenkins knows exactly when to show us the face of the white cop, understanding that the slow motion imagery will cast a shadow, one that will be felt and understood, across the rest of the film until the moment the cop meets Fonny is revealed.

Playing With Me Cos They Knew They Could

The cost of being black and innocent is writ large across the film, affecting all the black characters we see. One of the film's most celebrated moments is when Fonny's old friend Daniel (Brian Tyree Henry) stops by and recounts his shattering prison experience for something he, like Fonny, didn't do. The scene sees two friends trying to re-reach a comfort with each other that is impossible given what Daniel has gone through. It encapsulates the trauma and wreckage white supremacy is capable of inflicting and for Daniel mere survival is now virtually impossible. As the scene closes, Fonny's face goes blank, drained of life through the realization that such a future is not just possible for him but likely. A realization that the audience already knows has come to be.

The toll on Tish's family is immense, a sublime moment sees her Father sitting quietly, helplessly, in the kitchen as the camera pans to and past him from the sound of his Daughter, pregnant with Fonny's child, vomiting, emanating from the bathroom down the hall. Tish's mother has to fly to Puerto Rico to convince a woman she knows was raped to come back to America and say that it wasn't Fonny, knowing the real perpetrator may never be caught. By shifting between the mounting tragedy and an earlier bliss Jenkins is ensuring that the love story shines through but also that his characters remain defiant and don't buckle under the insurmountable weight.

The film beautifully captures how the problems the characters face daily are structural and deep-rooted, and it's also terrifying. The film is filled with sympathetic well-meaning people – A young Jewish landlord (played by Dave Franco) who offers to save the couple a loft space, a waiter friend (Diego Luna) who gives the couple some food when Fonny comes up short and a grocery store owner who steps in when The White Cop threatens to arrest Fonny for something else he doesn't do – the moment that propels Fonny towards his ultimate tragic fate. However, they are all powerless against the weight of history, capitalism and white supremacy. They are complicit in the big lie. The power of the film is subtle and accumulative, building to quiet emotional devastation that comes from spending time with characters caught in complex, often invisible, systems, just trying to reach a simple level of existence that should not be so out of reach. What the characters are aiming for is so low and comes at no cost to anyone else, yet seems so unattainable, despite the promise of the American Dream as available to everyone who follows the path.

Unbow Your Head Sister

The end of the film is startling [and somewhat controversially different from the book], bristling with a quiet image that is simultaneously an act of resistance and hopelessness. Fonny, Tish and Fonny Jr. share a meal in prison. It's not the table Fonny dreams of making earlier in the film, the one that his entire family will sit around and eat at, free, but they make the best of it. They know their place, and are making the best of it, while it lasts, knowing it will never be what was promised. In the *New Yorker*, Doreen St. Félix wrote that "Jenkins takes his protagonists out of the arena of realism and lifts them into an aria of beatific sadness". Tish and Fonny resist, and persevere, because what else is there? Criticisms of Jenkins' film have sometimes centred on how it is perceived to dilute the political bite of Baldwin's novel, but it could also be read as an act of resistance in giving its doomed central characters poetry and beauty in the way they are rendered in the everyday, in the whirlwind of their love. Jenkins' sensual imagery and tone, inspired by his idols including Wong-Kar-wai and Hou Hsiao-hsien but most definitely his own, is a cinematic equivalent to the poetry and power of Baldwin's language, both elevating these characters above their fate, into something eternal.