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Hip-Hop in Hollywood: Encounter, Community, Resistance

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Abstract and Keywords

In the early 1980s, Hollywood began to exploit hip-hop dance—especially breaking—to produce a limited series of movie musicals. These “breaksploitation” films set a standard of participation for young artists, and in particular, young artists of color, to enter the movie industry as laborers, and to enter the global imagination of film audiences as representative agents of change. This chapter explores the traditions of Hollywood musicals and dance artists of color just before the hip-hop film production era; the innovations of these early 1980s films in terms of their casting, creative approaches, and presentation of contemporary social dance; and the communities that these mediated projects both catered to and generated. Together, these films inspired a global audience for breakdancing, and are inextricably linked to the sweep and scale of young people’s interest in these corporeal practices.

Keywords: breakdancing, hip-hop, fame, Flashdance, style wars, Wild Style, Beat Street, Breakin’, global circulations of hip hop

This chapter constructs a genealogy of a “hip-hop body” in Hollywood films. We might note that media of the moving image has always encouraged the circulation of black social dances to a far-flung viewership. These film dances have transformed the terms of corporeal possibility for their audiences, no matter the historical era or location of the viewers. From the earliest Thomas A. Edison films of cakewalkers to the twenty-first-century Internet postings of California turf dancers, black social dances have been distributed via film to audiences eager to engage the physical possibilities of these dance and musical genres. The hip-hop body, though, raised an important capacity for dance in Hollywood to stand as a metaphor for community-based social engagement and neoliberal resistance to capital. The hip-hop body produced in Hollywood films stands as

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representative of racial and cultural exchange, indicates the possibility of progressive group politics, and restricts structures of hierarchical, old-guard authority.

Hip-hop dance found its way into Hollywood formulas very quickly. In the early 1980s, some Hollywood producers began to exploit hip-hop dance—especially breaking—to produce a limited series of movie musicals. These “breaksploitation” films set a standard of participation for young artists, and in particular, young artists of color, to enter the movie industry as laborers, and to enter the global imagination of film audiences as representative agents of change. As we consider the classic films of the breaksploitation era, predicted by *Fame* (1980) and *Flashdance* (1983), and including *Beat Street* (1984) and *Breakin’* (1984), we’ll consider the material circumstances of filmmaking, the representational narratives and editing techniques common to their construction, and the ways in which these films produced a commodified hip-hop dancing body that became a standard representational practice for the form. Taken together, these films inspired a global audience for breakdancing, and are inextricably linked to the sweep and scale of young people’s interest in these corporeal practices. We’ll (p. 114) also pay special attention to the grounding assumptions of normative corporealities that breakdancers upset by practicing their dances in the context of Hollywood musicals. Finally, we consider an emergent global audience for hip-hop cultural manifestations, one inspired in large part by the dissemination of these few films that depicted b-boying and b-girling.

After the Hays Code

To frame a way of thinking about the arrival of hip-hop dance and young artists of color in Hollywood, we have to revisit the circumstances of mainstream filmmaking of the 1970s and 1980s. By the time Hollywood abandoned the Hays Code to install the MPAA film rating system in 1968,² the genre of movie musicals had plummeted from popularity. The golden era of unspeakably white narratives following a tri-part formula of [white] boy meets [white] girl, boy loses girl, and boy gets girl became impossibly old-fashioned for emerging American audiences, and Hollywood slowed its production of the form. The fewer Hollywood musicals of the 1970s accentuated emotionally complex, indeterminate narratives that employed music and dance as elements among many; these musicals include *Cabaret* (1972), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1978). Note that the latter two movies, constructed around popular music forms of disco, rock, and funk, included artists of color as supporting and background characters. In some ways, we can argue that disco, rock, and funk music, which had grown from African American musical sources, inspired the 'natural' inclusion of artists of color into Hollywood musical scenarios.³

Indeed, shifts in popular music that acknowledged African American wellsprings in the 1970s, including disco and funk music, arrived alongside activist gains of the civil rights era. These musical genres posed representational challenges for conservative mainstream Hollywood production, as the leading artists in these forms were mostly African American and often gay. *Car Wash* (1976), *Thank God It's Friday* (1978) and *Can't Stop the Music* (1980) presented working-class characters of color trying to find their way amid the rising consumer-conscious era that preceded neoliberal economic policies of the 1980s. While popular music and dance feature in each of these films, their production values and promotional profiles held little in common with the overwhelmingly white golden-age Hollywood musicals of the past.

Indeed, the rising visibility of African American musicality and African Americans in public life surely opened a space for characters of color to be at the center of Hollywood musicals. *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), *The Wiz* (1978), *Hair* (1979), and *Fame* (1980) featured African American and Latina protagonists and secondary characters. Excepting *The Wiz*, we might note that these films incorporated dance only occasionally, and typically as a reference to the capacity of music to inspire rhythmic motion, more than as a necessary outgrowth of emotional activity that could advance narrative or describe character. More importantly, none of the leading actors of color in *Superstar* or *Hair* (p. 115) danced much at all, or narrated themselves as dancers in the subsequent telling of their careers. As popular music shifted toward funk and hip-hop outside of the movie theater, Hollywood struggled for ways to incorporate the rising visibility of African American arts, including rapping and hip-hop dance, in the musical genre.

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Fame (1980) offers an exceptional case in its presentation of young people of color, straight and gay, involved in then-contemporary music and dance. The protagonists of *Fame*—characters who hope to enjoy careers in the mainstream entertainment industry as creators and performers—aspire toward success marked by notoriety, rather than artistry. As the title of the film suggests, the young people here are encouraged to develop qualities of celebrity, and in this process, they are to learn the basic skills that mark the areas of artistry they engage—drama, music, and dance. But note that these skills are considered ancillary to the plot imperative to seek *fame* as its own reward. Surprisingly, the music and dance of the film do not refer to the emergence of hip-hop. The dance sequences of the film, created by Louis Falco, a former dancer with José Limón, employs a flowing, ballet-based modern dance mode popular in pre-professional dance training of the time. *Fame* intended to be of the world of young artists-in-training, but arrived more demonstrative of the world of a gritty, mainstream Hollywood and Broadway.

Fame trades in narrative tropes familiar to many Hollywood offerings that demean the aspirations of women; in the film, things end badly for all of the female characters. Jewish Doris Finsecker is impregnated, and by implication forced to abandon her dreams of acting stardom; wealthy WASP ballerina Hilary Van Doren, also impregnated, endures an abortion after a teary scene describing her ambivalence and disappointment at the turn of events that deter her from easy access to dancing stardom; and Latina singer and dancer Coco Hernandez ends the film in humiliation and degradation, topless and crying at an adult-film casting call that presumably ends her reach for musical and film stardom. These plot points, borne by characters stereotypically marked by flags of ethnic identity, demonstrate plot narratives that moved Hollywood musicals far from the previous golden era.⁴ While those earlier films had traded in a nostalgia for innocent times of the past, as in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952); or in locations far away from contemporary urban diversity, as in *Mary Poppins* (1964), the new Hollywood musical focused on themes presumably relevant to urban youth of the time. Note, then, how the shift to Hollywood musicals that could be buoyed up by hip-hop culture seemed to require a drastic shift in the sort of stories that could be told, as well as the performers who could be cast in order to tell them.

Hip-Hop and Hollywood

When hip-hop emerged as a cultural force in the 1970s and 1980s, it offered resistant aesthetic space for young people of color, especially in its originary neighborhoods of the South Bronx. Hip-hop proposed its organizational elements of writing (graphic arts), mc'ing (rapping), dj'ing (musical production), and corporeal activity (b-boying (p. 116) and b-girling) as creative foundation for a life well lived: life recognized to emerge on its own survivalist terms, resistant to existing structures of authority, and engaged with aesthetic and social concerns of the contemporary moment. Hip-hop emerged as

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profoundly concerned with the trope of the 'real;' the everyday valences of experience shared by young people far removed from the aspirational middle-class values proffered by Hollywood and other big media of the time. By their own accounts, few of the young artists affiliated with early hip-hop thought that its affiliated arts could become an avenue of economic advance.⁵ In some ways, the incorporation of hip-hop into Hollywood systems of production surprised its practitioners as much as the audience who enjoyed their sudden appearances on the screen.

By 1982, writers and pundits already called the corporeal form of hip-hop "breakdancing," with mainstream media following the lead of dance journalist Sally Banes's 1981 *Village Voice* article.⁶ Hip-hop spread to California quickly in communities of young people of color, and in the early 1980s, some savvy Hollywood producers imagined possibility in hip-hop's aesthetic devices. The opening gambit toward exploiting these possibilities of an alignment of hip-hop and Hollywood came via a 75-second sequence of the breakout hit *Flashdance*. From a fleeting vision in this respectable, but predictable, Hollywood concoction, b-boying claimed an international audience and inspired global interest hip-hop's physicalities.

***Flashdance* (1983)**

Flashdance deserves scrutiny for its many ambiguous delineations of class, ethnicity, and sexuality. Its story offers an obvious middle-class aspirational narrative, as steel-welder-by-day/exotic-dancer-by-night Alex enjoys a fantasy romance with her boss: middle-class, Porsche-driving plant manager Nick Hurley. Nick takes Alex to fancy restaurants and arranges her special audition for the Pittsburgh Conservatory of Dance. Alex is depicted as a free-floating, self-sufficient working-class cipher, a laborer who seems to enjoy her two careers as well as her huge downtown converted loft apartment. As portrayed by actress Jennifer Beals, Alex is visibly racially mixed but the film treats her as white by never making any reference to her ethnicity amid the blonde and visibly black women who work alongside her at Mawby's striptease bar. Alex seems to have few friends at her welding or dancing jobs; she acts as an emotional rudder for her white friend Jeanie, who suffers failed ambitions to become a professional ice skater. When Jeanie takes work as a dancer at the nude bar Zanzibar, Alex rescues her from the degradation. Despite its narrative sequences in stripclubs, sexuality in the film is strangely muted, without a hint of homoeroticism. Even scenes at Mawby's and the Zanzibar are presented as clean adult entertainment for heterosexual men. As the author of commonsensemedia.com points out, *Flashdance* is "largely a fairy tale, a glamorous wish-fulfillment pop fantasy for teen girls on what being an adult is like."⁷

Each of the dance sequences of *Flashdance* deserves its own analysis, but for our purposes the single "street dance" scene matters most. This scene acts as a set-up to (p. 117) grant Alex access to physical information she'll need in order to complete her narrative journey and successfully audition for the ballet school. The film presents its shots of the dancers here with an almost-documentary flourish, keeping the camera

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pulled back to a full-body distance for the bulk of its short duration. Most of the clips in this sequence last five seconds, and present solo movements performed by very young members of Rock Steady Crew. In the sequence, Alex and her friend Jeanie approach two b-boys who pop and pantomime in common moves of “wind-up toy” and “man walking with umbrella against the wind.” Alex and Jeanie stop to watch the dancing, and, in a suggestive time-lapse sequence, become the center of a crowd gathered to witness the ever-more spectacular gestures of the dancers. Dancers demonstrate floorwork, freezes, and a well-timed suicide dive to the smiles of the gathered crowd. The sequence seems to have little narrative content, but we will learn at the end of the film that the movements Alex witnesses here play a large role in her final, make-it-or-break-it dance audition sequence.

Alex stays among the crowd witnessing the b-boys, smiling at the edges of the film frame. At one point actress Beals dances improvisationally in response to the b-boying, swinging her hips and clapping her hands with enthusiasm, and a semblance of funkiness appears in her embodiment of a complex back-beat rhythm. But in this brief sequence, Beals lays bare her dispersed energetic field as entirely distinct from the precise, controlled energy exuded by her dance double, Marine Jahan. Jahan famously performed Alex’s dances, aided by an uncredited gymnast and b-boy Crazy Legs in the final dance sequence of the film; in this brief sequence, though, we note well that Beals is a different sort of social dancer than her doubles, including Jahan.⁸

In the culminating dance scene of the film, b-boying becomes Alex’s trump card as she creates a spectacular performance to secure her place as a student in the ballet school. After turning on her stretched foot in an enhanced, multi-cut sequence, she dives through the air, rolls and flips, and then backspins to the delighted applause of the audition committee. Her incorporation of a b-boy move in the ballet studio confirms the Hollywoodization of both the spreadability, and accessibility, of b-boying.

Oddly, though, we never see Alex practice her b-girl moves. Early in the film, Film 7.1 Flashdance (1983) Ending Scene  we are invited to voyeuristically watch Alex perform her sweaty home workout in a famous sequence replete with many close-ups of feet pounding on the floor, hips gyrating in circular pulsation, and throbbing splay-legged stretches. But the backspin that culminates her audition scene arrives prepared only by the logic of the Hollywood fantasy. The implication of her ability at the end of the film is either that she practiced off-screen, as she had rehearsed the three dances that she (implausibly) performs in the Mawby’s nightclub, or that she improvised her way into the movement sequence when the moment of the audition arrived. If we follow the logic of this latter implication, we note that b-girling is assumed to be entirely portable and obtainable, acquired and distributed by any dancers who happen to see it and then inhabit its contours. By no means is Alex to be considered a true b-girl, or even a nominal one; she simply performs a backspin. But, in that revolution on the ground, she confirms that b-girl corporealities belong within the Cinderella-story Hollywood frame of class mobility.

(p. 118) ***Style Wars (1983), Wild Style (1983), and Breakin' and Enterin' (1983)***

Flashdance continued a trend of dance-film; movies built around sequences of dancing set to songs, or montages, but without the actual singing presence of its main characters. It might be important to note that the breaksploitation films that followed *Flashdance* similarly resisted singing by their leading characters. These are movies that expect dancing to stand in for the singing moments of earlier musicals, and as such, they arrive with a distinctive profile from the mainstream of Hollywood fare. Two documentaries and one fictional film that leaned toward *cinéma vérité* established camera angle tropes for hip-hop Hollywood and the hip-hop body. *Style Wars*, shot in New York in 1982 and released the next year, held huge implications regarding the place of the camera in the development of the form, the sensibility of documenting and transmitting dance to a larger audience than the immediate participants in the cipher, and the direction of an inevitable future for hip-hop Hollywood filmmaking.

Style Wars treats breaking as a part of a constellation of public art, even as it interrogates the legality and ethical dimensions of graffiti on New York City subway cars.

Professionally produced, the film stabilizes the idioms of hip-hop with sequences that define its boundaries and confirm its participants' ambitions. A full-length documentary about then-established hip-hop culture, *Style Wars* includes several sequences of dancers demonstrating and playing with the form even as they offer evidence of its methods and its terms of engagement. In one sequence, a group, including youthful celebrity dancer Crazy Legs, defines and demonstrates steps from the "original breaking" vocabulary: categories of movement, including footwork, backbridge and headspin; and movements with names, including "the baby," "the turtle," a "dead freeze," the "headache," and "the hump." As in *Flashdance*, a crowd gathers as he offers evidence of these dance achievements; these scenes are cut with sequences of competitive nightclub dancing by two New York crews, the Rock Steady Crew and the Dynamic Rockers. In these scenes, the camera explores two vantages: low to the ground, and high overhead. These two angles become the benchmark aesthetics of presenting hip-hop dance on film. The low angle allows the film audience to imagine itself as a participant/witness within the circle of the battle cipher. The overhead angle invites the viewer to note the spectacular, circular energy generated by breakdancing in floorwork and power moves. It is important to note that neither of these two preferred camera angles are practical in the live experience of breakdancing; participants are seldom able to view these movements from the ground or overhead in live performance circumstances. The two 'impossible' angles allow film audiences to feel 'in on' the activity of b-girling and b-boying in a hip-hop-inspired cipher; they also establish a mode of viewing for dance in hip-hop films, as they visually confirm a spectacularly powerful, heroic, and towering hip-hop body.

(p. 119) ***Wild Style (1983)***

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Many of the young dancers of *Style Wars* appear in the independent Charlie Ahearn film *Wild Style*. The entire film *Wild Style* can be seen as Hollywood-aspirational in its attempts to inflect the underdog-survivor genre with hip-hop sensibilities. The story follows Zoro (played by celebrity graffiti artist Lee Quinones) as he struggles with his family and love relationships. Several emerging hip-hop luminaries appear in the film as themselves, or gently cinematized versions of themselves, including rappers Busy Bee, DJ Grandmaster Flash, and b-boys Crazy Legs, Mr. Freeze, Frosty Freeze, Prince Ken Swift, and Mr. Wiggles.⁹

The film looks raw. Shot in the South Bronx, replete with real-world imagery of filth and decay, it demonstrates the wasteland feeling of decrepit buildings and burned-out neighborhoods strewn with garbage, but tempered by interiors of functional, sparse, and chilly working-class Bronx apartments. In all, the film generates a seething isolation of a neighborhood all-but-forgotten in public discourse. While the South Bronx of the 1980s had been represented by Hollywood in gruesome films such as *Fort Apache: The Bronx* (1981); *Wild Style* offered vistas without apology for grime, spatial disorganization, and general urban blight pierced by the creative energy of hip-hop as a vibrant emergent cultural constellation.

While the screenplay has a narrative arc, dance appears in the film as a necessary and situated companion to music in several nightclub scenes. Dancers, including the Rock Steady Crew, Pop-O-Matics, and Electric Force, demonstrate their dance style in various club sequences; these extended scenes bear no narrative responsibility, and largely exist to confirm the accuracy of the film as a representation of hip-hop culture. B-boys are generally shown performing popping and locking, or engaging floorwork as soloists surrounded by a group of interested witnesses. Editing in the film cuts the bodies into fragments in these sequences, focusing alternately on torsos, feet, or hands, and seldom provides full-body imagery that might locate the dancers in space.

In one nightclub sequence, white underground actor Patti Astor appears as herself, and smiling onlookers escort her into the dance circle to encourage her to perform. The crowd eggs her on, and also laughs at her efforts. The sequence effectively demonstrates white interest in black social dance, as well as the inevitable inclusion of white witnessing and participation in these dance forms. Notably, Astor does not dance well, and comes across as an outsider to the aesthetic properties of the dance circle. Film 7.02 *Wild Style* (1983) Club Scene 

Wild Style offers important evidence of burgeoning hip hop Hollywood, in its extended depictions of b-boys in motion, its rawness of production, the inclusion of young teenagers as performers, and most importantly, the deconstruction of aesthetic ideologies of finish and perfection proposed by earlier movie musicals. If *Fame* offered bulbous, free-form structure via choreographer Louis Falco's contact-improvisation inspired choreography, *Wild Style* featured no sole choreographic author, and no assumption of overarching control over the movements captured on film.

(p. 120) ***Breakin' and Enterin' (1983)***

Directed by black film entrepreneur and producer Topper Carew, this hard-to-find documentary devotes a remarkable amount of time to California iterations of hip-hop dance and b-boying and b-girling. From its opening frames, the film features b-boys working on the ground in footwork, as soloists and in duets, and popping and locking toward the camera. The dances presented here are clearly street performances designed to attract attention from passing pedestrians who might contribute to a 'dancer's fund' by placing change and small bills into a passed hat. The dances arrive not as competition movements, as they had inevitably been in the New York films *Style Wars* and *Wild Style*. Instead, *Breakin' and Enterin'* offers viewers a spectator-centered form of hip-hop dance that will eventually lend itself directly to Hollywood production.

Like *Wild Style*, *Breakin' and Enterin'* seems raw, underdeveloped, and entirely of the furtive moment. Rappers and DJs narrate their methods directly to the camera; future celebrity rapper and actor Ice-T offers up rhymes that describe the creative gestures of the young artists documented here. The Radiohole—a Los Angeles-area club analogous to the New York Roxy—acts as site for demonstrations of hip-hop dance, including some sequences featuring b-girls. In all, though, the film feels like an advertisement or trailer for a longer film yet to be made. Note that many of the dancers chronicled in this documentary will become featured dancers in the breaksploitation film *Breakin'* just a year later. Film 07.03 *Breakin' 'N' Enterin' (1983) Opening Sequence* 

Breakin' and Enterin' has no particular story to tell about hip-hop culture in Southern California; rather it presents evidence of a hip-hop dance community without mobilizing that evidence toward any particular end. The film does offer documentation of the places and movements that hip-hop dancers engaged at the time. In addition to the Radiohole, we also encounter breakdancers dancing in the bright sunlight of Venice Beach, facing an inevitable crowd of onlookers cheering them on. As in *Style Wars*, young artists are called upon to narrate and demonstrate movements that they have devised and performed; in this film we get Boogaloo Shrimp explaining how to do "the helicopter" and end with a pose. Charismatic performer Shabba Doo offers a thumbnail history of pop and lock movements from the area that includes the "funky chicken," "the lock," the point," and the "Uncle Sam." Several dancers discuss the difference between street dancers and professional dancers, and the ways in which these dances are created, literally, on the streets, rather than in a dance studio or on a stage. This distinction arrives as a badge of honor for the dancers, who claim their 'outsiderness' to mainstream dance practice as a marker of their authenticity within hip-hop. Note, though, that Shabba Doo is willing to claim identity as a member of a Professional Street Dance crew, a company organized to consider hip-hop dancers as professional artists, responsible to the form and its professionalization. This claim sets the stage for a West Coast codification of hip-hop dance that can fit into emergent Hollywood aesthetic structures.

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Unlike *Style Wars*, *Breakin' and Enterin'* trades in post-production effects to enhance dancer movements. In one sequence toward the end of the film, a dancer's movements (p. 121) are transformed into a vibrating outline of a body in motion. The image offers a graphically entertaining method to demonstrate the visual trace of breakdance. But this sequence, replete with movement screened forward and in reverse, with saturated colors, and the insertion of unexpected amorphous shapes, suggests dancing without reference to the people creating the dance. The psychedelic editing style here demonstrates what Hollywood hip-hop will come to value: the dancing labor of young people transformed by electronic effect for a sensational visual image. Here, viewers come to see breaking as decorative demonstration, rather than a potential realization of identity, or expressive personal communication. Film 07.04 *Breakin' 'N' Enterin'* (1983) Post-Production Scene



These three films established a framework for thinking about the physical, aesthetic, and commercial locations of hip-hop dance in relation to Hollywood musical practices. In terms of physical location, hip-hop confirmed its capacity as a multiracial dance form, created and practiced by young artists, that lived outside of the dance studio, in venues of the outdoors and the dance club. Because hip-hop had grown up on concrete and cardboard, it offered a down and dirty, admittedly spectacular demonstration of physical capacity in dance that didn't require the special surfaces that tap dance, ballet, or modern dance often necessitated. In terms of aesthetic location, hip-hop arrived within newly articulated Africanist aesthetic structures noted by scholars, that (1) placed a high value on physical innovation and originality; (2) realized the importance of an individual's presence within a group dynamic; and (3) demonstrated a recognizable "flash of the spirit" in performance. In terms of commercial location, hip-hop arrived especially suited to the crucial marketing demographic of teenagers who saw the genre as generationally specific and as connected to the promise of a particular social life bounded by competitive events in idyllic urban nightclubs. Hip-hop routines were inevitably created by the performing artists, without recourse to the intervention of a professional choreographer. Thus, hip-hop required less production attention than other forms of Hollywood dance, as it could be rehearsed anywhere, its practitioners held themselves accountable to standards of quality that demonstrated their skill and virtuosity, and didn't require celebrity choreographic authority.

***Beat Street* (1984)**

The 1984 film *Beat Street* offers hip-hop as its object and subject, in a family-friendly story that demonstrates the communal bonding, criminality, aesthetic innovation, and youthful exuberance endemic to the genre in its foundational elements. B-boying, Mc'ing, Dj'ing, and Writing (spray-can art) are each represented in the movie as central elements of the lives of its various young protagonists of color. The movie gives hip-hop a full Hollywood treatment, with star-crossed romance, adventure, tragedy, musical-dance interludes, and a grand finale that, in their total, entirely contain the unruly offscreen

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capacities of hip-hop. The story addresses class divisions, hints at the implications of racial profiling, and confirms an inevitable heterosexuality and homosociality that were perceived to underscore hip-hop as a genre.

(p. 122) This Harry Belafonte-produced film arrives quite near to *Wild Style* and *Style Wars* in its approach and effect. It contains several obvious Hollywood narrative tropes, including a love song montage and a finale performance that reconciles antagonistic forces; it features hip-hop culture as an oppositional possibility of expression for young people, set within a framework of familial tensions and aspirational personal growth. The film follows a multiracial group of young protagonists depicted as generational and class outsiders to the then-contemporary world of mainstream, middle-aged, moneyed [white] beneficiaries of Reagan and Thatcher-era neoliberal economic policies. Four friends, each interested in one of the foundational elements of hip-hop—graffiti, dj'ing, mc'ing, and b-boying—make their way through a series of small adventures. The film includes scenes shot on location in the gritty South Bronx as well as several New York City subway stations and nightclubs of the early 1980s and several dance sequences that bear special scrutiny for their contents and implications.

In a dance battle sequence filmed at the Roxy nightclub, *Beat Street* echoes camera perspectives from *Style Wars*, including high overhead and low-to-the-ground shots. The camera captures a circle of witnesses and competitors in a showcase sequence that highlights the individuality of each performer who enters the circle. Reaction shots add to the sense of an audience engaged in the construction of the performance, and the participation of the entire group to decide on the winner of the competition. These two important features of a hip-hop cipher—the engagement of a witnessing audience, and the individuality of each competitor—arrive in full measure here.

In a later sequence, leading b-boy character Lee goes to a college theater to audition for a television program. In this sequence, breakdancing appears alongside neo-African jazz dance, choreographed for the film by Lester Wilson, an outstanding artist who had acted as choreographer for John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*. In this scene, the camera cuts in and out incessantly from the jazz dance, so that we only see a movement or two at a time in a frontal, presentational arrangement toward the unblinking and unsmiling camera. But as Lee shares his b-boy movements for the group, the audience forms a circle, to smile and cheer him on; their reaction shots are integrated into the exuberance of the dance as a whole.

Diegetic structure allows actors in films to engage in their creative performance arts by playing characters who possess similar skills; this method has long served film musicals as a way to extend the suspension of disbelief necessary for audience identification with film narrative. Steven Hager's screenplay structures *Beat Street* as a hip-hop backstage musical. The characters of the film are artists engaged in being artists, allowing sequences of dancing to emerge from situations that call for dancing. For example, an audition sequence for acts who hope to perform at the Roxy club allows for extended performances by singers, djs, and b-boys—in this case, two young men who demonstrate

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their locking and waving abilities. A subway-station battle scene arrives in the film without much plot preparation, but its outcome holds consequence for the characters involved in the dancing. Note that this subway sequence includes elements of synchronized choreography that has the battlers walking toward and past each other, and executing spectacular handsprings simultaneously, as dancers might in any Hollywood musical. Film 7.05 *Beat Street* (1984) Subway Battle 

(p. 123) In the film's final sequence, the breakdancers and the theatrical dancers come together in a spectacle cast as a tribute to a graffiti artist killed in a beef with a competitor. This number combines gospel singers with hip-hop dancers to suggest a transcendent possibility for hip-hop and breakdancing. In the logic of the film's narrative, the link of hip-hop to gospel intends to embed hip-hop within a larger framework of African American music and culture, and align it with acceptable modes of expression respondent to family values. The pairing of gospel and hip-hop responded to anxieties that hip-hop represented the anarchic displacement of black culture by the needs and desires of disconnected youth. But in the context of this final number, hip-hop becomes a corporeal expression of hope for young dancers who mourn their friend's passing.

In terms of filmmaking, though, random editing depreciates its value considerably, as three-second clips of b-boy floor work arrive among fleeting images of clapping gospel singers as well as turning and smiling musical theater dancers. B-boying arrives onstage here, without a participating audience encouraging its gestures, and in the process is rendered as a presentational genre, like jazz dance. The hip-hop body of the end of the film predicts a possibility for progressive group politics, as it connects to the needs of the community to mourn both inter-generationally and across musical cultures. But removed from its circle of participating witnesses, the hip-hop body succumbs to the authority of the presentational stage space, where b-boying might be interchangeable with theatrical jazz dance.

Breakin' (Breakdance: The Movie) (1984)—Centering White Womanhood

The earliest hip-hop films struggled with conventional wisdoms that assumed a limit to the capacity of a broad movie-going public to appreciate young men of color at the center of mainstream fare. Young men engaged in hip-hop culture could fit into conventional Hollywood narratives because they could be cast as outlaws to social norms or as criminals. For example, breakdancers worked without permits on the street and sometimes disrupted traffic in subway stations, and therefore they became eligible for arrest. The love story at the center of *Beat Street* arrived in slightly progressive terms, as it valued an emotional relationship between young people of color committed to their own choices as emerging artists amid a nuanced world that included contemporary classical music and dance as well as hip-hop culture. Rather than continue this line of possibility, though, the two most successful¹⁰ breaksploitation films of the early 1980s featured a

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white woman protagonist who comes to her emotional and social maturity via her encounter with hip-hop practice in southern California.

Breakin', released as *Breakdance: The Movie* in some countries, arrived as a predictable tale of subjection, resistance, and ultimate triumph for its main white woman character, Kelly. Played by young dancer Lucinda Dickey, Kelly is cast as the star of the film from its first credits; she acts in the film as the physical embodiment of a Hollywood-scripted (p. 124) hybridity of theatrical jazz dance and street dance. Set in and around the venues of the earlier documentary *Breakin' and Enterin'*, the film follows Kelly's movement away from the narrow and limiting life of theatrical jazz dance to the discovery of her inner balance and freedom as a hip-hop-capable, breakdance competitor, embedded within a world of young men of color, one of whom almost functions as her romantic interest. The film follows Kelly's degradation and sexual harassment in her initially preferred theatrical dance studio environment; her encounter and discovery of a vibrant b-boy culture on the beaches of Venice, California; her fascination and training within the milieu of breaking; her disappointments and setbacks with her new-found friends; and her ultimate triumph as a hip-hop inflected performer who ends up headlining a spectacular—and utterly ridiculous—stage show extravaganza alongside her new breakdancing friends.

The film confirms the emergent music video aesthetics of dance representation of the time that focused on quick cuts and physical segmentation, with dances pasted together visually, while tied to a single, well-produced audio track. From its first frames, we see short cuts of three to five seconds duration, segmenting the body into a flash of footwork, or the precise movements of arms or hands, or the torso popping and locking. Discrepancies between the screen dance performance and the tempo and accents of the music quickly confer that the audio heard in the movie theater was not always heard by the dancing performers during filming.

The setup for the film is Kelly's desire to work as a dancer; hip-hop becomes a way for her to believe in her dancing and connect it to a world larger than just her own ambition. Kelly's dilemma appeals to adolescent females. She wonders, should she sleep with her favorite choreographer and teacher, Franco, or can she find her way as an artist interested in her own choices? We follow Kelly through her milieus: first as a star dancer in a theatrical jazz class, then traveling with her queer African American friend Adam to see the street dancers on Venice beach. The film makes striking difference between the dance class, which is proscenium-styled performance that uses the mirror (and the camera) as the audience for the dance, and the Venice street dancing circle, which includes a participating audience of witnesses, clapping and dancing along as individual artists enter the circle to offer movements to the disco-inspired song "Freakshow." Notably, the main two hip-hop dancers are Kelly's co-stars, Ozone (Adolfo Quiñones, also known as Shabba-Doo) and Turbo (Michael Chambers), who are depicted to be queer-friendly; they embrace Adam and his friend warmly in a meeting sequence at the beach.

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The film depicts Kelly as naïve: someone who doesn't know anything about emerging hip-hop culture. She doesn't know language cues such as "fresh" or "bad," and her ignorance provides cues for the film viewers to learn about hip-hop at the same time as she does. When Turbo visits Kelly at her dance studio and joins into a contemporary jazz dance class, he opens the space from a frontal-oriented dance into a circle that calls and responds to his movements as he breaks on the studio dance floor. In this scene, and throughout the film, the tension between show dancing and street dancing represents tensions in Kelly's emotional life, as she has to choose between the forms.

(p. 125) The film has several dance set pieces, including Turbo's outstanding magical broom dance tribute to Fred Astaire, in which he performs with a broom that stands still, rises, and floats (with obvious wires) as he waves and pops through space to a hip-hop beat. Here, the camera stays at a distance for some time, to reveal the entirety of Turbo's body in motion, as it might have in an Astaire sequence. But note that the camera also moves in to provide segmented shots of Turbo's dancing ability that convey a sense of excitement. Throughout the film, Kelly's desires provide the impetus for dance representation: in another sequence, the main characters go to a nightclub to see hip-hop dance because Kelly is sad and needs to be cheered up. In this dance competition staged at the Radiotron, the camera moves in and out from the dancers in a balanced series of cuts generally timed with the movement and music, creating sequences that are exciting to watch and, thankfully, clear in terms of what's happening when and where.

The film narrative realizes ambitions to place hip-hop dance firmly within Hollywood tropes of adolescent self-discovery through white encounter with a munificent cultural other. Kelly is christened "Special K" by Ozone, in one of several memorable tag lines ("Every street dancer needs a street name"), and taken into the confidence of Ozone and Turbo so that they can do righteous battle with rivals the Electro Rock crew, Pop N' Taco (Bruno Falcon), Poppin' Pete (Timothy Solomon) and Lollipop (Ana Sánchez). Kelly has to learn how to be a street dancer, and during a two-minute Hollywood training montage of hand gestures and locking, she learns enough to compete convincingly. At the subsequent rematch with the Electro Rocks, Ozone offers up some wacking—a queer hip-hop dance style—before Special K is revealed as a surprise agent who wows the crowd with acrobatics and simple spins on her knees. The sequence tips its hat toward reality here: because Special K doesn't have much vocabulary as a b-girl yet, the trio can offer no unison dancing. Film 7.06 Breakin' (1984) Club Battle Rematch Scene 

The Hollywoodification of possibility forces the story into some awkward corners that are true to the musical/competition genre, but hard for hip-hop. An unfulfilled romance between Ozone and Kelly is exacerbated by Kelly's seeming flirtatiousness with professional manager James. James as the (white) 'professional' manager offers foil to (black queer) Adam as the 'play' manager; again, Kelly must convince the white establishment representatives that the cultural 'others' are worthwhile and valuable. Memorable quotes from the film along these lines include: "Street dancing won't get you to Broadway!" (James to Kelly); "They put more heart and soul into their work than anyone I know!" (Kelly to James); and "I don't dance for anybody but myself" (Ozone to

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Kelly, regarding James's scrutiny of the trio's dancing abilities in the nightclub). A "fish out of water" sequence at a Hollywood party pits Turbo and Ozone against upper-class white doyennes; an inspirational, "each-one-teach-one" sequence features Turbo teaching children locking and breaking in an alleyway. In this latter scene, a multiracial group of children are encouraged by Turbo, who calls directions to them: footwork, break, spin. The film adds layers to the cultural-encounter/opposites-attract narrative implications: Kelly must convince Ozone to participate in a stage dancing competition, and get over his fear of being "in the world." In turn, Ozone takes Kelly to the beach where the dancers include a disabled artist who offers up floorwork and headspins while on his (p. 126) crutches. The visual dissonance of the street forms as seen in the studio space, where trio Kelly, Ozone, and Turbo enjoy a playful montage of practicing in a white-walled, mirrored space created only for dance, confirms an oppositional narrative at work throughout the film.

For the final competition sequence, the heroic trio of dancers start in black tie, with a fake 'high-class' name as the "Allegro Vivace Dance Trio." When they are denied an opportunity to audition among the "professional dancers," Ozone walks to the table and tears his costume off, revealing himself as a rough-around-the-edges street dancer, and looks at each judge at the table, in the filmmaker's nod to the audition scene of *Flashdance*. The trio proceeds to dance without the sanction of the audition board, and, of course, they get the job headlining the ambiguous stage production that follows this scene. Here in the audition dance, and in the final show performance, the dance movements caught by the camera don't make any sense as a routine, and when the camera pulls away, the trio of artists popping, locking, and offering some floorwork, look small and insignificant on the large proscenium stage. When the camera moves in to frame the dancers at full body, or in close-up, though, their breaking and locking are revealed for their dynamic quality on film. Film 07.07 Breakin' (1984) Final Audition Scene. ▶ The final show that the dancers headline looks something like a cross between a music video and a fashion shoot; it arrives in a confusing and nonsensical manner that renders the actual dance movements to be irrelevant to the spectacle of fast cuts, camera movements, and extravagant costume and lighting shifts.

The final rhyme by Ice-T that leads into the credits extols "all of us have our dreams—you can make it with motivation hard, hard work and determination," and ends with a summary of what hip-hop tries to demonstrate in Hollywood: "colored people just like you trying to make their dreams come true." This lyric clarifies the 'insider-outsider' sensibility that surrounds these early hip-hop films; the performers and artists have little if any access to the technologies of reproduction and distribution that constitute Hollywood film production; these movies are the glimpse of celluloid celebrity available to an art form already ten years into its formation and practice.

Breakin' confirmed the Hollywood hip-hop body in its three important manifestations: as representative of racial and cultural exchange (in the encounters of Kelly, Ozone, Turbo, and other dancers), as an indicator of the possibility for progressive group politics (in the sequences of teaching youth and the formation of their dancing group), and as a method

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of resistance against structures of hierarchical, old-guard authority (represented by the jazz dance studio). Unfortunately, the producers of the film tried their luck in an unnecessary sequel that effectively undid any progressive possibilities present in their first offering.

Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo (1984)

This unexpected sequel, apparently filmed immediately after its progenitor, arrives more like an episode from a television series than a fleshed-out Hollywood production. (p. 127) Directed by B-movie specialist Sam Firstenberg, the 94-minute exercise trades in feel-good, happy breakdancing, presented in the style of an extended-form music video targeted to a family-friendly, pre-pubescent audience. The film includes throngs of multi-generational, happy dancers in theatrical dance idioms; scores of smiling breakdancers who face toward the camera at every opportunity; and an obvious narrative of dance as a tool that can bring a community together to resist the efforts of evil developers who would tear down an important community center in the midst of a mostly people-of-color neighborhood.

The sequel retains the same trio of main characters from the first film, and seems to pick up about a year later. As it begins, we meet Kelly, now dancing in a Las Vegas-styled stage show, while Ozone and Turbo now teach dance to children at the community center. Kelly tussles with her disapproving rich family, who want to send her to Princeton and marry her off to a handsome and wealthy young white lawyer. But by the end of the film, Kelly dumps her boring boyfriend, helps her friends from the 'hood win a dance battle or two, and brings together the neighborhood for a massive block-party dance show that convinces the city to leave its community center in place. Following the logic of Hollywood happy-ending narratives, Kelly's wealthy parents provide the final installation of funds needed to resist the developers as they come to appreciate the good work that she does for others. Note that this plot is repeated with only slight variation 25 years later in *Step It Up: 3D (2010)*.

The film tries to stabilize hip-hop dance movement as central to the new form of Hollywood musicals by incorporating its gestures in every conceivable locale and circumstance. In a nod to classic musical films including *An American In Paris (1951)*, an early sequence in the film depicts a happy multiracial neighborhood grooving and bouncing to a lightweight hip-hop beat. An overhead camera tracks through the scene to reveal the extent to which hip-hop dance has taken over the citizenry: everyone dances, and even a white policewoman giving tickets can bust a move to join in with a multiracial contingent of smiling church ladies who perform freezes and waves. Film 07.08 *Breakin' 2 (1984) Street Scene* ▶

In another sequence set in a hospital, “sexy nurses” perform MTV-esque music video dances, male patients breakdance in the hallways, doctors pop and freeze as they perform surgery, pregnant women perform unexpected acrobatics, and even patients in

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the midst of surgery awaken to join the dancing fray. As in the earlier large-scale Hollywood musicals, we see lots and lots of dancers, but very little actual dancing. Here, the bits and pieces of hip-hop dance that we see stand as a cipher of pleasant rhythmic motion available to all without any particular political valence. Film 07.09 *Breakin' 2* (1984) Hospital Scene 

Perhaps in a nod to the grittier East Coast phenomenon of *Beat Street*, *Breakin' 2* includes surprising staged representations of physical violence. A dance battle sequence set underneath a freeway overpass turns violent with the introduction of Nunchucks, a double-stick weapon popular in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. But the potentially serious issue of gang fighting becomes quickly undermined by the film's highly formulaic composition. Set pieces in the film include a fish out of water sequence for Turbo and Ozone visiting at Kelly's large suburban home, practically repeated from *Breakin'*; a montage in which Turbo learns how to romance a partner through coaching (p. 128) by Ozone; a montage of energetic fundraising activities for the community center; and a narrative dilemma of Kelly's choice between helping the center raise funds or dancing in a new show in Paris. Again, Turbo gets to pay homage to Fred Astaire, this time in a dancing on the ceiling sequence that allows him to pop, float, and wave across the walls and ceiling of his room as he imagines his burgeoning romantic feelings. Innovative in its conception but lacking in its technical realization, the disappointing sequence echoes a general sense of production malaise that plagued early hip-hop films.¹¹

While *Breakin' 2* nodded toward a nominally progressive narrative politic of the underdog rising up against corporate greed, as well as a multiracial alliance that might resist white hegemony, the film trivializes these possibilities by containing the hip-hop body within its strict Hollywood formula. By the end of this film, in the ultimate dance party production number, the hip-hop body is rendered interchangeable with other kinds of dancing bodies, no matter any political ambition of their movements or histories. This potential for Hollywood accommodation of a hip-hop body stuck, and virtually all films involving hip-hop or breaking after the millennium treat hip-hop as a weapon suited to answer a need to raise money and resist social ills, including *Honey* (2003), *You Got Served* (2004), and the *Step Up* series (2006, 2008, 2010, 2012).¹²

Several successful musicals emerged in the era alongside these breaksploitation films, most notably *Footloose* (1984) and *Purple Rain* (1984). While each of these Hollywood blockbusters concerned itself with the place of young male creative expression, neither bothered to explore hip-hop. Films from the next years, including the Sidney Poitier-directed *Fast Forward* (1985), Michael Schultz's *Krush Groove* (1985), and the Joel Silberg-directed *Rappin'* (1985) used hip-hop as a plot point to allow their protagonists to overcome social challenges presumably important to young audiences: staying current in dance (*Fast Forward*), building a successful business (*Krush Groove*), and, not surprisingly, saving a neighborhood from a greedy land developer (*Rappin'*). *Rappin'* arrived as an especially poor offering; it borrowed its narrative from *Breakin' 2*, and while it did include actor Ice-T repeating his role as an ostensible tour guide through hip-hop

(as he had in both *Breakin' and Enterin'* and *Breakin'*), the film offers several weak demonstrations of dance neither fish nor fowl; not recognizable as breaking or b-boying, but rather, as poorly done Hollywood jazz dance. In all, the film arrives undercooked and hammy, and demonstrates minimal relationship to hip-hop culture. Perhaps it stands as the ultimate breaksploitation film, titled in relationship to an urgent cultural innovation, but offered as a low-cost talent show, poorly executed.

Briefly Upsetting the Norms of Hollywood Dancer Training

The early hip-hop films called for dancers capable of engaging b-girling and b-boying in recognizable, spectacular motion; this need created opportunities for dancers (p. 129) who had trained in peer-mentored local crews rather than dance studios. But this brief shift of access to work in the film industry abated quickly, as codified hip-hop and breakdancing classes sprouted up around the world. By the time that iconic Hollywood dancer Gene Kelly created on-screen narration for *That's Dancing!* (1985), a travelogue of dance on the silver screen, hip-hop was treated as the foundational dance technique of the present moment. In scenes immediately following the film's opening credits, Kelly narrates as a group of breakdancers demonstrate their moves on a piece of cardboard in a gritty outdoor street. In two short years, Hollywood had absorbed popping, locking, and breaking, and transformed an aesthetic constellation of physical practice that spoke to political and social circumstances, to deploy it largely as a containable, shorthand narrative marker of race, class, and upward-mobility aspiration. Film 07.10 *That's Dancing* (1985) Gene Kelly 

In all, as the *Breakin'* movies unequivocally confirm, these early hip-hop films were fast to make, and responded to the bubble of interest in hip-hop by cultural outsiders. The distribution of the imagery contained by these films spread hip-hop corporealities toward an eager and interested global public, one which quickly copied its moves and embraced its physical ideologies.¹³ Throughout the 1990s, a rise in hip-hop dance classes and studio-based training practices led to the codification of hip-hop as a form with a pyramidal structure—something that could be learned from a teacher, rather than developed by the artists involved, as had been the standard of transmission until that time. This shift in teaching and transmission restabilized hip-hop as a form that could be controlled by the marketplace; a form suitable for film production that could be organized and overseen by a hired choreographer or dance director. Hip-hop dance moves continued to trade in the individual innovation of its practitioners, but over time, young artists contributed fewer and fewer movements to the choreographic soup that became screen versions of hip-hop dance.

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The hip-hop body produced by these early hip-hop films arrived consistently in encounter with young people of color, with an interest in the possibility of group work to produce social change, and a resistance to standing traditions of control and authority exerted by those outside the group. These three imperatives of a hip-hop real spoke to the dissident, resistant impulses that had inspired hip-hop as a cultural form in the neighborhoods of the urban United States. Remarkably, the Hollywood film industry managed to absorb these conditions of hip-hop affiliation even in treachery, hegemonic commercial productions of the twenty-first century. If nothing else, this constructed hip-hop body made way for young artists of color to be included in Hollywood musicals, even if they would still not become the central characters; it offered narrative strategies of collective cooperation to disenfranchised youth, even if those film-character youth seldom wanted more than to save the community center/program in order to fight big business another day; and it confirmed the ability of young people to create their own expressive forms of culture, even if hip-hop film choreographers became essential to latter-day production teams. These achievements may not have been obvious for the earliest b-boys and b-girls whose movements were committed to celluloid, but the breaking they began surely continues.

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Notes:

(2) . The Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays code, was adopted by the precursor to the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) in 1930 and remained in effect until 1968. The code allowed censorship of Hollywood productions according to guidelines of moral decency. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motion_Picture_Production_Code.

(3) . See *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* by Thomas Doherty (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988).

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- (4) . Several contemporary studies of race, gender, and sexuality in Hollywood musicals offer alternative renderings of their contents; see *The Musical: Race, Gender and Performance* by Susan Smith (London and New York: Wallflower, 2005); and *The Hollywood Film Musical (New Approaches to Film Genre)* by Barry Keith Grant (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).
- (5) . This narrative is repeated in virtually all of the documentaries of hip-hop referred to in this chapter.
- (6) . See Sally Banes, "Breaking," in *Fresh: Hip Hop Don't Stop*, edited by Nelson George, Sally Banes, Susan Flinker, and Patty Romanovsky. New York: Random House, 1985, 79–112.
- (7) . See <http://www.common sense media.org/movie-reviews/flashdance>; accessed January 12, 2012.
- (8) . See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flashdance>; <http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,20087493,00.html>; accessed January 12, 2012.
- (9) . For full cast information, see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0084904/fullcredits#cast> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wild_Style.
- (10) . According to the website <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=breakin.htm>, *Breakin'* earned 38,602,707 in lifetime domestic release, *Breakin' 2* earned 15,101,131, <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=breakin2.htm/>, and *Beat Street* earned 16,595,791 <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=beatstreet.htm>.
- (11) . Sound effects for this sequence have not been "sweetened" in any fashion to provide anchoring into an everyday world of gravity. Instead, we hear a poor pop song playing that may or may not actually go along with any of the dancing that Turbo performs. The disconnection of sound and image renders the sequence much less powerful than Fred Astaire's dance in *Royal Wedding* (1951), which included Foley sound effects that tied the dancer's movement to a normative gravity.
- (12) . Note that there are few, if any, hip-hop dance films from the 1990s; the exception to this trope might be the highly successful *Save the Last Dance* (2001), which updates *Flashdance* with a white female theatrical dancer learning hip-hop, and taking on a black boyfriend, in order to successfully audition for the Juilliard School.
- (13) . Scholar Mary Fogarty has called the connections among hip-hop devotees linked by film "imagined affinities." See Mary Fogarty "Breaking Expectations: Imagined Affinities in Mediated Youthf Cultures," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 26:3, 449–462, 2012.

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