

Immersion, Intimacy, and Isolation

Subversion of Space in *Sorry to Bother You* (2018)

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ABSTRACT

Sorry to Bother You (2018) emerged among a rising trend of Afrosurrealism in American film and television. Through frames within frames and character proxemics, director Boots Riley transports the viewer into the surreal reality of Cassius Green (Lakeith Stanfield) to critique the Afrosurreal capitalism found in the film. *Sorry to Bother You* follows Cassius' rise through the ranks of RegalView, a telemarketing agency that essentially sells slave labor. To become a power caller, Cassius adopts a white voice so that his white customers will feel more comfortable with him. In turn, the more confident Cassius becomes in his white voice, the more intimate he allows himself to become with the call recipient, as illustrated by the characters' on-screen proximity. Coincidentally, the immersion into the call and intimacy with the white customer create trouble for Cassius at home, as he increasingly isolates himself from his class-conscious girlfriend, Detroit (Tessa Thompson).

Sorry to Bother You (2018) emerged among a rising trend of Afrosurrealist film and television in the mid-to-late 2010s. Compared to surrealism, which distorts reality through absurdity, Afrosurrealism presents a "realism so real" that it "forces a total reorientation to self and society," shifting our "understanding of the republic" (Francis 101). Afrosurrealism features "magical" or "hallucinatory" details, but maintains a heightened sense of reality in political, cultural, and racial contexts (Francis 104). In essence, Afrosurrealism signifies the creation of a reality that is evocative of our own. It works as a looking glass, pinpointing details to illustrate the horrors of the American experience.

The film follows the rise of a young Black telemarketer, Cassius Green (Lakeith Stanfield), who adopts a "white voice" to succeed at his job. Cassius elevates from telemarketer to

"Power Caller" as his former coworkers attempt to unionize. He rises among the best of RegalView's power callers after landing a sale for WorryFree, a company that sells modern-day slave labor and houses employees in lavishly decorated prisons. Later, the company's CEO, Steven Lift (Armie Hammer), explains his development of Equisapians—a human-horse hybrid and the future of labor—hoping Cassius will join the project as the "Martin Luther King" of the new people. Amidst it all, director Boots Riley subverts the space on screen to make viewers active participants, transporting them into Cassius' point of view.

Mise-en-scène is directly used to create cinematic reality. Gibbs notes that mise-en-scène "encompasses both what the audience can see, and the way in which we are invited to see it" (5). Similarly, Tarkovsky finds, "The image is an impression of



Fig. 1 | Commercials show the benefits of being a WorryFree employee in *Sorry to Bother You*, 00:06:02, Annapurna Pictures, 2018.

the truth, a glimpse of the truth permitted to us in our blindness” (106). The filmmaker uses *mise-en-scène* to make Cassius’ subjective experience the film’s objective reality. Through frames within frames and character proxemics, *Sorry to Bother You* depicts capitalism as a system that breaks down private space, turns intimacy into exploitation, and ultimately treats bodies as tools for profit, namely through WorryFree and the Equisapien project. Riley transports viewers into Cassius’ rise and fall, showing how comfort, status, and proximity to power alienate him from his community and make him increasingly complicit in the system that exploits him and others. In the film, viewers become active participants, highlighting their own complicity in capitalist societies.

On a first viewing of *Sorry to Bother You*, viewers might be most stricken by the hauntingly white-sounding David Cross and the comedic dubbing evocative of Spaghetti Westerns. However, the deeper the viewer dives into the film, the more they come to understand immersion as the tool shaping Riley’s cinematic reality. From televisions to billboards to cell phones, Riley explicitly places the primary focus within the secondary. Rather than letting news coverage or billboards fill the entire screen, Riley utilizes frames within frames to transport viewers directly into Cassius’ point of view (Fig. 1).

To illustrate the transactional nature of Cassius’ existence, Riley physically places Cassius within the world of the phone call. The more Cassius masters his white voice, the shorter the distance between him and the call recipient, illustrating his rise to power caller. The callee becomes more comfortable with Cassius because he sounds whiter than they do; as Langston (Danny Glover) notes, “It’s not really even a white voice;” it is what white callees “Wish they sounded like.... What they think they’re supposed to sound like” (00:14:42–00:14:52). Cassius sounds whiter and more worry-free than the person on the other end of the line, enabling both the recipient and himself to be more comfortable with the closeness.

In his first call, before mastering his voice, Cassius is uncomfortable with the intimacy (Fig. 2). On the couch, the callee is



Fig. 2 | Cassius is isolated from the intimacy of the phone call before finding his white voice in *Sorry to Bother You*, 00:10:33. Annapurna Pictures, 2018.

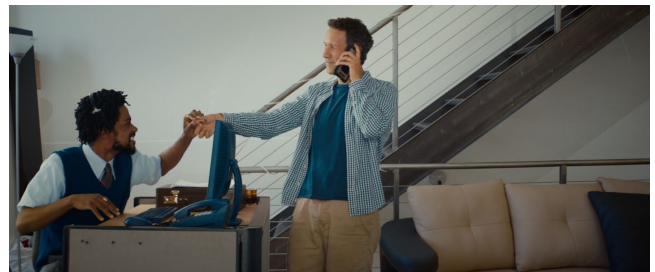


Fig. 3 | Cassius and a recipient share a blunt as he finds his white voice in *Sorry to Bother You*, 00:25:00. Annapurna Pictures, 2018.

having sex. Cassius is positioned on the right side of the screen, immersed in the world of the call recipient, yet isolated, uncomfortably looking away from the sexual deed. Several scenes later, Cassius has mastered his voice. He shares a blunt with a white recipient, highlighting that he is now confident with the recipient and the transaction, though not fully connected (Fig. 3). Accordingly, as he becomes a power caller, Cassius becomes linked to the callee. In the transaction of his final call, Cassius sits touching the recipient (Fig. 4). Their legs are intertwined, and their faces touch as the recipient sits on a toilet. A master of his white voice and of the capitalist society that prioritizes it, Cassius breaks down private space in the world of the call, exploiting the call recipient as the capitalist system exploits him.



Fig. 5 | Cassius and Detroit kiss before waking up in the new apartment in *Sorry to Bother You*, 00:52:07. Annapurna Pictures, 2018.



Fig. 6 | Cassius and Detroit sleeping in the new apartment in *Sorry to Bother You*, 00:52:11. Annapurna Pictures, 2018.

To rise to the top, Cassius sticks to the script. He climbs the corporate ladder and becomes increasingly intimate with his recipients. In doing so, he becomes increasingly isolated from his friends and his class-conscious girlfriend, Detroit (Tessa Thompson). In the montage, Cassius' room transforms from lacking to splendor, juxtaposed against the growing distance between Cassius and Detroit. The white voice that makes Cassius valuable to his employer creates a rift with his loved ones; his proximity to power excludes him from his community.

Through a series of transitions from beat-up to brand-new, Cassius' former life is replaced. He becomes engrossed in new, more costly goods. While the transformation of goods is visually striking, the most meaningful elements in this sequence are the couple's proximity and the direction they face. Initially, the couple is placed closely, facing each other in profile and kissing (Fig. 5). A dissolve signals a change in time. Among Cassius'

new wealth, they no longer face one another, nor are they touching (Fig. 6). Still in profile, they face opposite directions, a rift between them. Detroit no longer wants to be with Cassius because she no longer thinks he is with the cause. Like commodification, Detroit and Cassius continue to use each other for sexual transactions, but his money disgusts her too much to be in a relationship. Eventually, they reunite, but only after Cassius acknowledges his role in the trap of material success and exposes Lift's plan for the Equisapian project across national television. Cassius gives up his high-rise apartment and intends to return as a regular telemarketer, but he turns into an Equisapian before that happens.

In an end-credits scene, Riley breaks from identifying frames within frames with Cassius' point of view. From Lift's point of view, Riley stages images of Cassius as Equisapian and of Lift's reaction in succession, as if to say, "Now it's your turn" (Figs. 7 and 8). With nothing else to lose, Cassius confronts the

surreal truth that, for the capitalist system to survive, he will be taken advantage of by any means necessary. Cassius has lost everything. Now he will make sure that Lift loses everything, too. The end-credits scene immerses viewers in Lift's perspective, illustrating that everyone in capitalist societies is complicit, from the top down. *Sorry to Bother You* satirizes American society, and, like all good satire, it is incredibly perceptive. Steven Lift is likened to a handful of trisyllabic-named billionaires with their teeth sunk into American culture, capital, and politics. The film was released two years into the presidency of one of them. It is unlikely that Riley's film is an overt critique of President Donald Trump; however, it is clearly critical of the trap and exploitation of an economic system that led to his rise to fame. *Sorry to Bother You* argues that we are all complicit in capitalist societies, but, in an attempt to shift our understanding of the republic, it asserts that those at the top are far more complicit than those at the bottom. ■



Fig. 7 | Security footage shows Cassius and his group of Equisapians in an end-credits scene in *Sorry to Bother You*, 01:45:33. Annapurna Pictures, 2018.



Fig. 8 | Lift's reaction to Cassius in the security footage in *Sorry to Bother You*, 01:45:35. Annapurna Pictures, 2018.

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