

= White Dog =

White Dog is a 1982 American drama film directed by Samuel Fuller using a screenplay written by Fuller and Curtis Hanson loosely based on Romain Gary 's 1970 novel of the same title . The film depicts the struggle of a dog trainer named Keys (Paul Winfield) , who is black , trying to retrain a stray dog found by a young actress (Kristy McNichol) , that is a " white dog " ? a dog trained to viciously attack any black person . Fuller uses the film as a platform to deliver an anti @-@ racist message as it examines the question of whether racism is a treatable problem or an incurable condition .

The film 's theatrical release was suppressed in the United States by Paramount Pictures out of concern of negative press after rumors began circulating that the film was racist . It was released internationally in France and the United Kingdom in 1982 , and broadcast on various American cable television channels . Its first official American release came in December 2008 when The Criterion Collection released the original uncut film to DVD .

Critics praised the film 's hard line look at racism and Fuller 's use of melodrama and metaphors to present his argument , and its somewhat disheartening ending that leaves the impression that while racism is learned , it cannot be cured . Reviewers consistently questioned the film 's lack of wide release in the United States when it was completed and applauded its belated release by Criterion .

= = Plot = =

Young actress Julie Sawyer (Kristy McNichol) accidentally runs over a stray White German Shepherd Dog one night . After the dog is treated by a vet , Julie takes him home while trying to find his owners . A rapist breaks into her house and tries to attack her , but the dog protects her so she decides to adopt him , against the wishes of her boyfriend (Jameson Parker) . Unbeknown to her , the dog was trained by a white racist to attack any and all black people on sight . It sneaks out of the house one night and kills a black truck driver in an attack . Later , when Julie takes the dog to work with her , it attacks a black actress on the set .

Realizing something is not right with the dog , Julie takes him to a dog trainer , Carruthers (Burl Ives) , who tells her to kill the dog . Another dog trainer named Keys (Paul Winfield) , who is black himself , undertakes re @-@ educating the dog as a personal challenge . He dons protective gear and keeps the dog in a large enclosure , taking him out on a chain and exposing himself to the dog each day and making sure he is the only one to feed or care for the dog .

The dog manages to escape , and kills an elderly black man in a church , after which Keys manages to recover him , and opts not to turn the dog in to the authorities , but to continue the training , over Julie 's protests . He warns her that the training has reached a critical point , where the dog might be cured or go insane . He believes that curing the dog will discourage white racists from training dogs like this , though there is no indication in the story that this is any kind of national problem (the film is set well after the civil rights era , the setting of the original novel) .

After a lengthy time , it seems as if the dog is cured , in that he is now friendly towards Keys . Julie confronts the dog 's original owner , who has come to claim him , and who presumably trained him to attack black people . She angrily tells him in front of his grandchildren , who only know the dog as a loving family pet , that the dog has been cured by a black man .

Just as Julie and Keys celebrate their victory , the dog , without warning , turns its attention to Carruthers and brutally attacks him . The dog had not previously shown any aggression towards him ? no explanation for this is given , but the implication is that the dog 's programming has somehow been reversed , though that was never Keys ' intention . To save his employer 's life , Keys is forced to shoot the dog , and the film ends with the image of the dog 's body lying in the center of the training enclosure .

= = Themes = =

White Dog is a " blunt , highly cinematic parable about race relations " that questions whether

racism is a curable mental illness or learned behavior , or if it is an untreatable disease . The unnamed white German Shepherd is the metaphor of racism , with his radically contrasting moments of innocent , typical dog behavior when not around black persons , and his snarling viciousness when he sees a target . Paul Winfield 's character Keys , who believes he can help the dog unlearn this behavior , represents the view that racism can be unlearned . Keys ' attempts to reprogram the dog become a " bold literalization of the race war " , and as the film progresses Keys becomes obsessed with the idea that he can cure the dog . Much like Captain Ahab , he declares that if he fails with this dog , he will find another and another until he succeeds . Keys ' counterpart , Carruthers , a white trainer , believes the dog is irredeemable and should be killed , representing the view that racism cannot be cured .

The snarling dog , its white fur stained with bright red stage blood , becomes a typically imposing , outscale Fuller image - the embodiment of snarling , irrational and implacable hatred . Typical , too , is the way Fuller emphasizes the radical contrast between the dog in its innocent , unaroused state ? big brown eyes staring up at McNichol ? and its plunging , salivating attack mode .

Scenes showing Kristy McNichol innocently burying her hands in the dog 's fur and his normal loving behavior when alone with her provides a stark image of " how hatred can be familiar , reassuringly close " . J. Hoberman argues that the film " naturalizes racism in an unnatural way " in the contrasting depictions of white characters horrified by the dog 's behavior , and black characters who grimly accept it as a fact of life . The film 's ending has been argued to emphasize Fuller 's own view that racism is something that is learned , but that once learned is a " poison " that can never truly " be banished from those it infects " . But on the other hand , the dog is actually cured of attacking blacks , but not cured of his own hatred since the last thing he does is to , unprovoked , attack a white man . The ending implies therefore that it is hatred (and not racism) that cannot be banished from those it infects .

In the original Romain Gary novel , this was not the story that was told ? the dog started to attack white people because a black man embittered by white racism deliberately retrained him to do so .

= = Production = =

White Dog 's roots lie with a 1970 autobiographical novel written by Romain Gary of the same name . The story was purchased for use by Paramount in 1975 , with Curtis Hanson selected to write the screenplay and Roman Polanski hired to direct . Before shooting commenced , Polanski was charged with statutory rape and fled the country , leaving the production in limbo . Over a span of six years , the project was given to various writers and producers , who all focused on the stray dog story from Gary 's original work . Gary 's activist wife was replaced in the script with a young , unmarried actress because Paramount wanted to contrast the dog 's random attacks with a loving relationship between the protagonist and the dog . Paramount executives noted that they wanted a " Jaws with paws " and indicated that they wanted any racial elements to be downplayed . In one memo , the company noted : " Given the organic elements of this story , it is imperative that we never overtly address through attitude or statement the issue of racism per se " .

By 1981 , Gary 's wife and then Gary himself had committed suicide . At the same time , Hollywood was under threat of strikes by both the writer and director guilds . Needing enough films to carry the studio through in case the strikes happened , White Dog was one of thirteen films considered to be far enough along to be completable in a short time frame . With a push from Michael Eisner , White Dog was one of seven that Paramount put on a fast track for production . Eisner pushed for the film to be one of the selected ones because of its social message that hate was learned . Producer Jon Davison was less certain and questioned the film 's marketing early on . Hanson , back on board as the film 's screenwriter , suggested Samuel Fuller be named the film 's director as he felt Fuller was the only one available with the experience needed to complete the film on such a short schedule and with a low budget , while still doing so responsibly with regard to the sensitive material . Davison agreed after visiting Fuller and seeing Fuller act out how he would shoot the film .

Fuller readily agreed , having focused much of his career on racial issues . Already familiar with the novel and with the concept of " white dogs " , he was tasked with " reconceptualizing " the film to

have the conflict depicted in the book occur within the dog rather than the people . In an earlier Variety magazine interview , Fuller stated that viewers would " see a dog slowly go insane and then come back to sanity " . Before filming began , the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) , the Black Anti -@-@ Defamation Coalition (BADC) , and other civil @-@ rights leaders began voicing concerns that the film would spur racial violence . In an editorial in the Los Angeles Times , Robert Price , executive director of the BADC , criticized the studio for producing the film based on a book by a white man and using a primarily white cast and crew , rather than producing the film with African Americans in key positions . He also considered Gary 's work to be a " second @-@ rate novel " and questioned its use when " book shelves are laden with quality novels by black writers who explore the same social and psychological areas with far more subtlety ? "

Fuller was confident in his work and the idea that the film would be strongly antiracist , particularly with the changes he had made to the original work . The novel 's hate @-@ filled Muslim black trainer , who deliberately retrained the dog to attack white people , was converted into the character of Keys , who genuinely wished to cure the animal . Fuller also changed the novel 's original ending into a more pessimistic film ending . The film was shot in only forty @-@ five days at a cost of \$ 7 million . Five white German Shepherd Dogs played the unnamed central character .

After filming commenced Paramount Pictures brought in two African @-@ American consultants to review and approve the depiction of the black characters : Willis Edwards , vice president of the local NAACP chapter and David L. Crippens , the vice president and stage manager of the local PBS affiliate . In the end , they walked away with different views of the film . Crippens did not find the film to have any racist connotations , while Edwards found it inflammatory and felt it should not have been made , particularly during that year when a series of murders of black children was occurring in Atlanta . The two men provided a write @-@ up of their views for the studio executives , which were passed to Davison along with warnings that the studio feared a film boycott . Fuller was not told of these discussions nor given the notes until two weeks before filming was slated to conclude . Known for being a staunch integrationist and for his regularly giving black actors non @-@ stereotypical roles , Fuller was furious , finding the studio 's actions insulting . He reportedly had both representatives banned from the set afterwards , though he did integrate some of the suggested changes into the film .

The film was completed in 1981 , but Paramount was hesitant to release the film out of continuing concerns that the film would be misconstrued . Though no one from the organization had viewed the completed film , the NAACP threatened boycotts . In early 1982 , the studio finally held preview screenings in Seattle , Washington and Denver , Colorado , with mixed responses . That fall , another test run was held in Detroit , Michigan , which resulted in praise from critics but little public interest . The film was finally left unreleased , with Paramount feeling it did not have enough earnings potential to go against the threatened boycotts and possible bad publicity . Dumbfounded and hurt by the film 's shelving , Fuller moved to France , and never directed another American film .

= = Distribution = =

Paramount felt the film was too controversial for release , giving it only a few limited preview runs before shelving it . The film 's first theatrical release occurred in France on July 7 , 1982 . In the United Kingdom , it was part of the 37th Edinburgh International Film Festival and the 27th London Film Festival in 1983 , and was released late that year by United International Pictures . It received positive reviews in both countries . Lisa Dombrowski of Film Comment notes , " In the end , Sam Fuller 's White Dog was muzzled by a collision of historically specific economic and political interests , as support for freedom of expression took a backseat to Paramount 's bottom line and the NAACP 's ongoing battles with Hollywood over representation and employment . A Sam Fuller thriller was simply not the kind of antiracist picture that a major studio knew how to market in 1981 or that African @-@ American organizations wanted Hollywood to make at the time " .

In 1983 , White Dog was edited for a direct @-@ to @-@ television broadcast and made available

purchase by cable channels . The following year , NBC bought broadcast rights for \$ 2 @. @ 5 million and slated the film to air during the February sweeps , then canceled the broadcast two days later due to pressure from the continuing NAACP campaign and concerns of a negative reaction by both viewers and advertisers . The film was eventually aired on other cable channels sporadically and without fanfare . It was also infrequently screened at independent film houses and film festivals .

Its first official American release came on December 2 , 2008 , when The Criterion Collection released the film to DVD . The DVD has the uncut version of the film , video interviews from the original producer and writer , an interview with the trainer of the dog used in the film , and a booklet of critical essays . The National Society of Film Critics bestowed the distributor with a special film heritage award for releasing the film .

= = Reception = =

Due to its limited release , it only grossed \$ 46 @, @ 509 . While today the film is generally seen as a B @- @ movie , it was initially praised by critics upon its release , particularly for its treatment of racism and Fuller 's directorial talents . Dave Kehr , of the Chicago Tribune , praised Fuller for " pulling no punches " in the film and for his use of metaphors to present racism " as a mental disease , for which there may or may not be a cure " . Kehr considered the film less melodramatic or bizarre than Fuller 's earlier works , which was also positive since it left the film " clean and uncluttered with a single , concentrated line of development mounting toward a single , crushingly pessimistic moral insight " . Entertainment Weekly 's Kim Moran called it a " uncompromising , poignant examination of racism " and felt it was one of Fuller 's most inspired films and a " gripping , meditative , and ultimately beautiful achievement " . Video Business reviewer Cyril Pearl called it " bombastic , odd and quite chilling " and felt the film was an antiracist work that " deserve [d] an audience " .

Charles Taylor , writing for The New York Times , lambasted the film 's original suppression due to " the stupidity of pressure groups " that wrongly labeled the film as racist when it is , in his words , " a profoundly antiracist film , though a despairing one " . He praised Winfield 's tense performance and Fuller 's use of melodrama to create one of his " most potent " films . Lisa Dombrowski , the author The Films of Samuel Fuller : If You Die , I 'll Kill You ! and an associate professor of film studies at Wesleyan University , referred to the film as " an impassioned attack on racial hatred " . Another New York Times reviewer , Janet Maslin , praised Fuller 's " command of stark , spooky imagery " , " B @- @ style bluntness " , and the way the cinematography , scene setting , and soundtrack combine to give the film " the blunt , unnerving power of a horror story " . She also commended Paul Winfield 's performance as Keys , feeling the actor turned what might have been a boring character into one audiences would find interesting . Slant Magazine 's Fernando F. Croce felt the film was " part marauding @- @ animal horror movie , part Afterschool Special , [and] part tragic @- @ sardonic agitprop " B @- @ movie that is " searing confrontation of the irrationality of prejudice " .

In The Magic Hour : Film at Fin de Siècle , J. Hoberman referred to the film as an " unusually blunt and suggestive metaphoric account of American racism " . Though he felt the film was a " sad waste " of Fuller 's talent , he praised the director 's treatment of the work , including the changes made to the source material , noting that " filmed in headlines , framed as allegory , White Dog combines hard @- @ boiled sentimentality and hysterical violence . " He praised the musical score used in the film for lending dignity to the " iconic visuals and cartoon dialogue . "