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HEADLINE: HBO's '**Thug Life** in D.C.': A Void Filled With Violence

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BODY:

There is something oddly, horribly reassuring about the HBO documentary "**Thug Life** in D.C.," a film that focuses on the youngest prisoner in Lorton's maximum-security wing, a ruthless gangster who faces a life sentence for wounding a cop and later killing another teen. Reassuring because the sources of Aundrey Burno's murderous rage and nihilism are easy to identify. By the end of "**Thug Life**," which airs tonight at 11, we fully understand how poverty and social pathology doomed this child.

This is not new journalistic or artistic territory. But in the context of recent events, the program--commendable in itself--becomes even more engaging. In contrast to the privileged teen killers of Columbine High, who were denied nothing, Burno was born without a future. Known to friends as "Crazy Aundrey" or "Dark-Skin 'Drey," he grew up in a Southeast Washington housing project. Director Marc **Levin** could have presented a cliched portrait of a ghetto child, but instead he humanizes Aundrey and examines the poisons coursing through the lives of such young killers.

Burno and his fellow convicts inherit their bravado from a rich tradition of American gangsterism, both white and black. They rap about Jesse James; they fancy themselves modern-day gunslingers. For them, violence is both heroic and empowering. Burno may relate more to slain rapper Tupac Shakur (who had "**Thug Life**" tattooed on his torso), but he echoes Jimmy Cagney's character in "White Heat."

What, the director asks, does Burno consider the high point of his life?

"When I got my gun," the teenager replies instantly. "When I got my hands on a gun, I felt like I was on top of the world."

In September 1995, when he was 16, Burno walked up behind a black police officer at a convenience store and shot him through the neck. He evidently wanted the patrolman's 9mm Glock semiautomatic. (Officer Gerald Anderson survived and tells the filmmakers, "I didn't want to die on Martin Luther King Avenue.")

When we first meet the suspect, he masks his face with a towel, bank-robber-style, and uses the name Bruno. "I'll tell you the definition of thug: I'm the definition of thug," he boasts. "I'm going to kill again if I have to. I'm going to do what I have to do to survive."

Over the course of the sometimes repetitive 75-minute film, the mask falls away. "I'm a thinkin' man," the convict says, and it's true. We discover a conflicted and vulnerable character who blames himself, not racism, for his crimes:

"It's us who's killin' us--the white man ain't walkin' up to us, shootin' us in our head. It's our next-door neighbors." In one of the film's most telling statements, he adds: "They say we killin' off our generation. Our generation died years ago. Our generation died when our fathers was born."

Director **Levin**, who also made the well-regarded feature film "Slam," overreaches by positioning Burno as somehow representative of the African American males who end up supervised by the criminal justice system. But this is a cautionary work: We are meant to see what can happen when a kid is born to an impoverished teen mother, grows up fatherless, has no adult role models to steer him away from selling dope for easy money, and is steeped in a culture of senseless violence (reflected here in the gangsta rap that pervades the documentary).

Burno tries to warn his little brother Kevin about the perils of **thug life**, but in scene after chilling scene, it's not clear whether the message is taking hold.

Though he looks no older than 10, Kevin believes he'll probably end up in jail. He, too, is an aspiring gangsta rapper, proudly spewing a particular racial slur and bragging that the inmates "don't want to mess with me."

Is it any wonder, as long as our children feed on such poison, that some of them are going to die?

Lorton prisoner Aundrey Burno, the subject of HBO's documentary

"Thug Life in D.C."

GRAPHIC: Photo, hbo/WALTER WOODWARD

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