

# Do the Right Thing

(1989, Lee, USA)

**Component 1: Varieties of Film & Filmmaking (AL)**  
**Component 1: American film (AS)**

**Core Study Areas**  
**Key Elements of Film Form**  
**Meaning & Response**  
**The Contexts of Film**

**Specialist Study Area**  
**Auteur (AL)**

## Rationale for study

*Do the Right Thing* is arguably Spike Lee's finest film. It is a visually and sonically inventive piece of cinema, which beautifully captures the heat and bubbling racial tensions of late 1980's Brooklyn. Its themes of division, anger and police brutality are as important today as they were when the film was first made.

## STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and Timings/Links

### 43.56-47.02 - Racial Harmony

This sequence graphically exposes the racial tensions that underpin the film with the use of static camera and breaking the fourth wall, as some of the protagonists insult other racial groups. The lead-up conversation between Pino and Mookie is particularly revealing.

### 129.17-133.00 - Death of Radio Raheem

The climax of the film exposing the racist attitudes and actions of the NYPD and their direct involvement in the death of Radio Raheem. It also provides a moment of catharsis for Mookie. Interesting use of camera movement and framing throughout.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

### Cinematography

Ernest R Dickerson's cinematography is full of interesting devices and techniques, many of which are worth concentrating on when looking at sequences.

The use of colour is fundamental in stressing the heat and intensity of the day. There is a controlled palate employed by Dickerson (and further stressed in the *mise-en-scène*) which directly reflects the heat with its warm range of shades – yellows, reds, ambers and warm tones.

There is an intermittent use of canted angles to reflect the increasingly fragmenting atmosphere generated by the film's events, as well as discordant shifts in framing. There are also a number of shots which move with fast dollies, stopping abruptly in front of characters.

There are also examples of characters caught in medium close-up, looking directly into the lens breaking the fourth wall.

### Mise-en-Scène

The vivid *mise-en-scène* reflects the heightened reality presented in the film. This is reflected in the highly stylised use of costume and the attention to detail where the wrong or right sort of trainer is given a huge amount of significance.

The major conflict in the film is underpinned by the pictures in Sal's Pizzeria, showing prominent Italian-Americans. Buggin' Out wants these replaced by photographs that reflect the full spectrum of famous African-Americans from Michael Jordan to Malcolm X. This conflict based on what these props represent is vital to understanding the climax of the film.

The strong emphasis on the setting of the block adds to the growing intensity around the film's events. The film doesn't leave this during the timeframe of the narrative. The audience quickly become aware of the brownstone buildings,

the radio station (with its vast window), the stores and of course the pizzeria. A number of confrontations also occur on the hot streets.

### Editing

Lee does utilise a number of aspects of what might be considered a standard Hollywood style of editing, utilising continuity and parallel editing and developing the events of the narrative over a short time-span of a day.

That said there are also examples of fast editing in places with aspects of dialogue sometimes crosscut on each line. The 'racial slur montage' also utilises the juxtaposition of different, racist viewpoints to excellent effect, by showing the undercurrent of anger bubbling under New York's surface fuelled by ethnic difference.

The film ends with the diametrically opposed use of quotations by Dr Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. This powerful ending to the film can be read as summing up a number of the major discourses pursued throughout the film.

### Sound

Music is very often a significant way in which meaning is created in Spike Lee's films and this is very much the case in *Do the Right Thing*. Public Enemy's polemical track 'Fight the Power' is used throughout the film in a number of different contexts from Tina's dance during the title sequence to Radio Raheem's use of it on his boombox.

The politicised nature of its lyrics is enhanced by the loudness by which Raheem plays it in the neighbourhood. Also the enduring quality and influence of African-American music is celebrated in a beautiful monologue by Mr Senor Love Daddy.

Bill Lee's (Spike's father) lush, orchestral score is steeped in a classic, Hollywood tradition. It has a nostalgic, at times melodramatic quality and it underscores a number of key moments in the film. It too has its roots in a deeper African-American musical tradition with at times a dreamy, bluesy jazzy feel.

The screenplay for the film was nominated for Best Original Screenplay and much of the dialogue is whip-fast and the interplay between some of the characters in confrontational situations is delivered with real gusto. The argument between Clifton and Buggin Out is a fine example of this as are the scenes between Mookie and Pino.

## CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

### Representations

The film throws up a huge amount of areas to study under this heading and there are a number of different ways into this. It should be clear that Lee's own middle-class, black background will have a direct impact on whom and what is represented in this film.

The urban Afro-American experience is captured well in this film and this is also underpinned by a number of further frameworks around gender and age. These add a level of complexity which does challenge more conventional stereotyping of black characters in Hollywood film. It is worth considering these within a broader framework by focusing on the main and minor protagonists, Mookie, Jade, Buggin' Out, Radio Raheem, Da Mayor, Mother Sister, and Smiley. Ethnicity and racial conflict/division is at the core of this film. The multi-ethnic nature of the Bed-Stuy neighbourhood on the hottest day of the year is a melting pot which is reaching boiling point. The seemingly besieged Italian pizzeria owning family, the Korean shop owners, the Puerto-Rican kids (and of course Tina) and the largely white NYPD are all framed and developed in contrasting ways.

The representations of Tina and Jade have been criticised as being overtly exploiting their bodies and sexuality. Jade for example is often viewed through Sal's point of view and Tina from the opening credits is both heavily sexualised and portrayed as the nagging girlfriend. Gender has long been an issue in Lee's films (although this could be contradicted by his latest film *Chi-raq* (2015)). He has been sharply criticised by black feminist writers for his conventional construction of masculinity and his stereotypically negative portrayal of women as passive and powerless. Certainly the men in this film seem to want to solve their issues through loud vocal set-pieces and ultimately through violent actions. In terms of female representations though, Jade and Tina do challenge some of these preconceptions of passivity, the sexualisation of Tina arguably from the start and the infamous ice-cube scene undermine this reading. The positioning of Jade as 'the good girl' and the simplistic portrayal of Mother Sister as the block's symbol of matriarchy may also be considered problematic.

The Bedford-Stuyvesant neighbourhood of Brooklyn where the film is set, does offer an interesting discourse on the 'melting pot' ideology

of the American Dream. Puerto-Ricans, Koreans, Italian-Americans and Afro-Americans all co-exist in the neighbourhood, but the film's heated atmosphere brings all the bubbling tensions to the core. There is also an indication of encroaching gentrification, as shown by Clifton's confrontation with Buggin' Out. Of course this predicts what has happened in Brooklyn today with rising rents and the eviction of long-standing (mainly black) residents. Age is also an important feature in the film, most obviously with Da Mayor and Mother Sister. These protagonists represent a surviving, generational difference from the younger characters. Their names are linked directly to concepts like extended family and community and even though Da Mayor is a drunk, he does have a particular, dignified power that impacts on the film. It is also worth assessing the representations of Sal and Sweet Dick Willie here as well.

### **Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, Influences, Auteur, Motifs)**

The feel and mood of the film is deep-rooted in its contextual basis and also in its portrayal of a viciously hot day in Brooklyn. This is developed by the key elements of film form (see earlier). That said, the notions of a Brechtian morality tale are key to viewing the film which also utilises postmodern devices to support Lee's political position.

The episodic nature of the narrative also helps to underpin the slow fragmentation of this community. The narrative is framed initially by Mister Senor Love Daddy who observes a number of events occurring outside his window. This is supported by Da Mayor's rambling through the neighbourhood eliciting different reactions. Mookie's position of being caught in the middle of the main confrontation can also be said to be where the spectator is positioned.

The angry tone of the film is a key part of Lee's signature as a black director and his reaction to a number of events (listed below under contexts). The main influence on his thinking for the film was an incident at Howard Beach where a young black man Michael Griffiths was murdered by white youths for asking for directions at a 'white' pizza parlour.

### **CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS – Contexts**

#### **Social**

*Do the Right Thing* couldn't have arrived at a more

turbulent and opportune moment. New York City had been rocked by a number of racially charged incidents, for example the mob killings of Michael Griffiths and Yusuf Hawkins invoked in the film's opening. The film is also deeply prophetic in terms of how the relationship between US police forces and black youth has further deteriorated over the years, due to a number of killings of unarmed African-Americans. What is also important is the continuing rise in the popularity of hip-hop and rap culture. Public Enemy were by far the most politicised of these artists, articulating their anger at their position in what they saw as a racially divided America.

#### **Historical**

The film was released towards the end of the Cold War, with the US left with no real grand ideological scheme or enemy to define the country against, the internal differences in America started to be re-examined across a number of areas but particularly race. This is represented at a micro level in this film, which also manages to expand the issue as purely not just about colour but ethnic difference.

#### **Political**

The film is rooted in a period of Republican domination in national US politics, with the end of the Reagan era and the start of Bush senior's reign as President. However at a more local level, the political situation in New York at the time is just as interesting. Mayor Koch had overseen the rejuvenation of New York's fortunes after being nearly bankrupt in the mid-1970s. However, this hadn't really benefited the impoverished Blacks and Hispanics in the city. The film was released in the lead-up to the 1990 mayoral election and there is an implicit sense that viewers should 'do the right thing' and vote for the black (later successful) candidate David Dinkins.

#### **Institutional**

This was Spike Lee's third feature and he had already established himself as a director who was both critically and commercially successful. He was in charge of his own production company (Forty Acres and a Mule) and was in search of a large Hollywood company to finance and support the picture. After protracted negotiations with a number of companies (Paramount and Columbia) he reached a final agreement with Universal to produce the film. Due to the New York location of the shoot there were union issues. From the off Lee was displeased with the \$6.5 million production budget that Universal were putting up (average studio budgets then were \$18 million). There were

also concerns about the very specific location in Brooklyn where Lee wanted the film to be shot. The film also fell into what Hollywood felt was a niche audience demographic and it was essential that it has some form of crossover appeal to go into profit.

### **SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - AUTEUR - STARTING POINTS**

Spike Lee's position as an auteur is certainly closely aligned to a number of factors around the visual style of his films but also his preoccupations as a black filmmaker of the position of African-Americans in US society.

At the time of this film's release Lee the main director as part of a growing number of black filmmakers who were reflecting the growing emergence

of hip-hop culture (and white audiences' interest in it) and also reacting to what was going on in America's cities with the black community.

He also has some degree of control over the projects that he chooses as he runs his own, very distinct film production company. Lee has also stepped outside of fiction filmmaking by making documentaries on a number of issues, but all rooted in some sense of the American black experience (*Four Little Girls, When the Levees Broke, Bad-25*).

Despite his high profile as perhaps the most prominent African-American director ever, he has struggled to get funding for recent projects and is now involved in producing and directing a dramedy for Netflix based on his first film *She's Gotta Have It*.