Do the Right Thing: Crash Course Film Criticism #6

Crash Course: Film Criticism
https://youtube.com/watch?v=bZBmOd83Fds
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/bZBmOd83Fds

Mainstream American films don't often tackle race and racism head-on, and when they do, they often end up trying to find easy answers. Which makes films like Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* all the more powerful.

It's an intimate portrait of a Brooklyn neighborhood, with a vibrant, intergenerational, multi-ethnic community. But it also has an explosive climax, fueled by racial resentments, economic anxiety, and rising tensions on the hottest day of the year.

Lee uses an incredible array of filmmaking techniques to make audiences think and engage. And the issues he's wrestling with are still very much alive today, more than 25 years later.

[Opening music]

Do the Right Thing burst onto screens in 1989, after electrifying audiences and polarizing critics at the Cannes Film Festival. At the time, writer-director Spike Lee was just 32 and had made only two feature films - the sly, sexy *She's Gotta Have It* and *School Daze*, a comedy set at an all-black Southern college.

Lee began conceiving *Do the Right Thing* with his cinematographer Ernest Dickerson as they were finishing work on *School Daze*. He was partially inspired by an incident in 1986 in which Michael Griffith, a 23-year-old African-American, was beaten up and chased from an Italian-American pizzeria, only to be killed by an oncoming car. Having grown up in Brooklyn, steeped in the complex lives and racial politics of its residents, Lee wanted to make a film that captured that world.

The story of *Do the Right Thing* takes place almost completely over one blistering day in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn. Rather than following one traditional protagonist, this film follows a variety of characters as they try to beat the heat, make a living, take a stand, or just get by. It's a film about community.

Spike Lee plays Mookie, a young African-American man who delivers pizza's for Sal's Famous Pizzeria, a neighborhood hangout. And it's through Mookie and the restaurant that we're introduced to most of the other characters.

There's Sal himself, a proud Italian-American played by Danny Aiello. He works with his two sons, the aggressive Pino, played by John Turturro, and the more passive Vito, played by Richard Edson. Then there's Da Mayor, played by the legendary Ossie Davis, a kind of elder statesman and alcoholic who wanders the streets trying to keep the peace. Mirroring that, there's Mother Sister - played by Ruby Dee, Davis's real life wife - who keeps a watchful eye on the neighborhood from her open apartment window.

Mookie runs into friends throughout the day, from Giancarlo Esposito's politically outspoken Buggin' Out, to Bill Nunn's Radio Raheem, who carries around the world's biggest ghetto-blaster, cranking Public Enemy's hip-hop anthem "Fight the Power." Woven through the story is Smiley, a developmentally delayed man played by Roger Guenveur Smith, who makes a few dollars here and there selling a photo of Malcom X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

And overlooking the whole thing is a smooth-voiced radio DJ played by Samuel L. Jackson. He not only spins tunes, but also watches the day unfold from his window, calling out to characters as they pass his studio.

Beyond the Italian-American and African-American characters, there's a grocery store run by a Korean couple, a group of Latino kinds, and Mookie's girlfriend Tina, played by Rosie Perez. There's also one white yuppie, who signifies the coming gentrification of the neighborhood. And finally, a pair of white New York City policemen patrol the streets in a squad car.

All these characters and their plots keep interweaving throughout the day, leading to a climactic showdown that ends with a riot, Radio Raheem dead from a police chokehold, Sal's Famous Pizzeria in flames, and everyone trying to find a way forward.

This film, like many films, is all about emotion and visual communication. Lee, his cinematographer, and production designer worked tirelessly to create a mood and the sense of a ticking time bomb.

So, looking at this film is a great way to understand how cinema affects an audience. One of the things Lee does to ratchet the tension and immerse us in this very specific world is to emphasize how hot it is. And he uses all kind of filmmaking techniques to do it.

Not only does the cinematography highlight the blasting rays of the sun, but Lee had production designer Wynn Thomas remove all the blues and greens he could from the costumes, props, sets, and make-up. Instead, the film is a feast of warm colors: vibrant reds, oranges, and yellows.

Lee and Dickerson even put heat lamps right under the camera lens in some shots to produce those wavy heat shimmers. Characters are routinely covered in sweat, their clothes stick to their bodies. And their tempers are set on a hair trigger, just waiting to be ignited.

Lee mixes all kinds of filmmaking styles, mirroring the way the block mixes cultural identities. The movie begins with a heavily-stylized color-saturated dance sequence that plays during the opening credits. In it, Rosie Perez dances alone to "Fight the Power." This is the film asserting its agenda right up front, both stylistically and musically. It's a challenge, but it's also fun and exciting, just like the rest of the film.

Lee makes excellent use of wide tracking shots as characters move from one part of the block to another. These shots feel expansive and natural, and yet they're clearly highly choreographed. He'll have minor characters move through the background or step in at the end of a scene to redirect the story. That kind of meandering is actually really had to pull off, and the work here is seamless. It underlines the interconnectedness of the film's community.

At other times, Lee and Dickerson will tilt the camera 45 degrees in what's often called a Dutch, or canted, angle. Suddenly, the horizon line isn't flat and the world feels unstable and off-kilter. It's almost as if the characters are in danger of falling out the screen because their world is so off-balance.

In one of the film's most powerful sequences, Lee even has his characters look directly into the camera, breaking the fourth wall. And they unleash the most profane string of ethnic and racial insults in the film. As the film critic Thomas Doherty writes in *Film Quarterly*: "The interethnic, interracial animosity explodes in a montage of face-front slurs...that serve as warm-ups for the ultimate bonfire."

All this anger and resentment simmering below the surface prepares us for the eruption that's about to come. It also adds another dimension to a film about community. Because this community, however harmonious it may seem, is deeply, perhaps irrevocably, fractured.

The film echoes this fracturing by shifting tones and moods. Scenes will go from light-hearted and funny to tense at the drop of a hat. In one sequence, kids from the neighborhood open a fire hydrant and

cool off in the spraying water. All the tensions dissolve for a while as people start dragged their friends in to get soaked. It's a glorious free-for-all.

And suddenly, this carefully-choreographed, stylized film seems to take the approach of a documentary. It's as though Lee set the action in motion and is just capturing it as it happens. The freedom of the camera mirrors the freedom of the characters.

Then, a middle-aged Italian-American drives a beautifully-maintained convertible up the street. He threatens the kids not to spray him as he passes. And not in a nice way, either. As the insults fly back and forth, and the tension returns, Lee and Dickerson lock their camera down again.

And sure enough, when the man drives past the hydrant, the kids turn the water loose, dousing both him and the car. The man storms out of his car, the kids run, and the cops show up, shutting off the hydrant, and ending the fun.

The shifting moods of *Do the Right Thing* are a large part of its power. The film keeps us unsure about which encounters are going to lead to trouble and which ones are going to end in humor. In the lighter moments, we empathize with the community. We don't want to see it torn apart.

At one point, Radio Raheem faces off against a group of Latino kids who are playing their own music from a slightly smaller boom box. When Radio Raheem cranks his volume to the max, the other kids nod sheepishly, conceding that Radio Raheem's speakers can't be beat. And this moment is more than just a funny gag. The ghetto blaster means something.

When Radio Raheem cranks it up, he's not only demonstrating his machine's power, he's also asserting his cultural identity and the coming dominance of hip-hop. And, in fact, the final confrontation that ends with Radio Raheem's death and the destruction of the pizzeria escalates when Sal demands Radio Raheem turn the music down. This time, instead of ending with a laugh, Lee flips the script and has Sal smash the ghetto blaster to bits, bringing on the killing and the riot.

Critics and scholars have been debating the film and its ultimate stance on race and racism since it was released. Film critic David Denby initially labeled the film incoherent and irresponsible. Political writer Joe Klein even warned that the movie might spark actual riots.

Roger Ebert, on the other hand, strongly disagreed, writing: "Thoughtless people have accused Lee of being an angry filmmaker. He has much to be angry about, but I don't find it in his work. The wonder of *Do the Right Thing* is that he is so fair. Those who found this film an incitement to violence are saying much about themselves, and nothing useful about the movie."

Whatever its stance, *Do the Right Thing* is an unapologetically political film. It wrestles very explicitly with two strands of black activism, and what those two approaches mean for the community as a whole. There's peaceful, direct action, as advocated by Martin Luther King, Jr., and a more militant strain, most often associated with Malcolm X. The film presents us with characters on all sides of this divide, from Buggin' Out who tries to organize a boycott of Sal's pizzeria, to Mookie, who just wants to get through his day and get paid.

Outside the black community, we have everything from the obvious racial antagonism of the Italian-American in his convertible, to Sal, who begins the film with a kind gesture toward Da Mayor, despite the objections of his own son, Pino.

By the end of the film though, Sal is revealed to be a much less sympathetic character. His stubborn refusal to add photos of African-Americans to his "Wall of Fame" and his destruction of Radio Raheem's boom box led directly to violence. Not only that, but Sal destroys the boom box with a worn baseball bat, itself a heavy symbol of violence against African-Americans, including in the incident with Michael Griffith.

Some scholars point to this character as key to Spike Lee's strategy for engaging with white audiences, especially when he's tackling racism. In the journal *Thinking Through Cinema: Film as Philosophy*, Dan Flory writes: "Lee depicts sympathetic racist characters so that viewers may initially forge positive allegiances with them in spite of those characters' anti-black beliefs and actions, which in earlier stages of the narrative seem trivial...or may even go unnoticed. He then alienates viewers from such characters by revealing the harmfulness of these typically white beliefs and actions."

In other words, Lee's choice to make Sal sympathetic early in the film forces non-black audiences to confront their own, perhaps deeply buried, notions of race and racism - especially as the story reaches its boiling point, and Sal is revealed to be a much more harmful character.

During the film's climax, Mookie finds himself sharing a shot with Sal and his sons as they face down Buggin' Out, Radio Raheem, and Smiley. He's on one side of the divide. Only after Radio Raheem has been killed by the police does he signal that he's had enough, crossing the street, emptying a garbage can, and then hurling it through the window of Sal's restaurant.

Did Mookie do the right thing? A more traditional film about race may have ended there, suggesting triumph in his revenge. But Spike Lee isn't interested in declaring right and wrong. Remember, he's making a film about a community. And that community has to get up the next day, sweep up the ashes, and find a way to move forward. And that's exactly what happens.

It's an uneasy ending, not traditionally satisfying, but it feels very real and immediate. These same difficult conversations about race, violence, and community are as relevant to our society today as they have ever been. For Mookie, Sal, Spike Lee, and the rest of us, the struggle continues.

Next time, we'll look at *Lost in Translation*. It's a quieter, more contemplative film about a lost young woman who strikes up a friendship with an older, fading movie star in contemporary Japan.

Crash Course Film Criticism is produced in association with PBS Digital Studios. You can head over to their channel to check out a playlist of their latest amazing shows, like Eons, Origin of Everything, and Deep Look.

This episode of Crash Course was filmed in the Doctor Cheryl C. Kinney Crash Course Studio with the help of these nice people and our amazing graphics team is Thought Cafe.

[Theme music]