



## Movie Club

### Do the Right Thing (1989)

1. *“Do the Right Thing (1989), a polemically charged portrait of contemporary race relations, became a subject of controversy at the same time that critics praised its allusive imagery.”* (Monaco, J. *How to Read a Film: Art, Technology, Language, History, Theory*. Oxford, New York, 2009. p. 410) Do you see more the allusive imagery or the controversy? Did you find the allusive imagery confronting? Are there softer moments in this polemic? Is it still polemically charged with a controversial edge today? Is this something that has increased in recent years in the US with things like the Black Lives Matter movement?

2. Language is given a great deal of weight in the film, and takes on an even musical quality. It is the turning point of the confrontation between Sal and Radio Raheem and Buggin’ Out, when Sal, in a fit of anger, calls them the N-word. But there is also something of a pride taken in being able to deal out these racial slurs, with the rhapsodic recitation by Mookie, Pino, Stevie, Officer Long and Sonny. The language of racial discrimination is both something that brings groups together as well as something that divides people that calls to attention clear, visible demarcations. There are however less hateful and more celebratory displays of virtuosic lyricising, like when Mister Senor Love Daddy does a “Roll Call”, or when Radio Raheem contemplates the battle between love and hate. What do you make of these varied uses of language? Does it have a musical quality, and are some more pleasingly musically than the others? Where else is language used to divide or bring together? Does the film make a link between language use and race?

3. Cultural symbols also play a large role in the exchanges, with use of music being both an obtrusive and subtle technique. Cultural icons come up in the discussion between Mookie and Pino, where Pino, admitting he admires many African-American musicians and sportsman, doesn’t see them as the same as those that live in the neighborhood. And of course there is the central source of conflict in the film, with Sal, a proud Italian-American, displaying his cultural icons with little notice given to the predominate culture in the area. The song “Fight the Power” by Public Enemy, a song written on Lee’s request for the film, takes a prominent role in the film, opening it, as well as playing several times on Radio Raheem’s boom box. In the opening it is especially confronting, or would have been for a 1989 audience for whom groups like Public Enemy would have been unknown, the group only gaining mainstream appeal later on. Pair this with Rosie Perez’s exuberant dancing and Ernest Dickerson’s striking red saturated cinematography and it immediately places the viewer in an unfamiliar environment, both culturally and narratively. The lyrics take direct shots at two icons of American culture: "Elvis was a hero to most / But he never meant shit to me / Straight up racist, the sucker was / Simple and plain, Muthafuck him and John Wayne!" The song also uses numerous samples from the likes of James Brown, Trouble Funk and the Dramatics, creating a dense culturally

potent sound created with “loops on top of loops, on top of loops.” (Katz, M. (2004). *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music*. University of California Press.) This is one of the covert uses of music in Lee’s film, but it is not purely confrontational within the larger musical framework. “Spike Lee’s ‘authorial’ position regarding music and narrative is uniquely oppositional (voicing black history within a traditionally white industrial context) *and* mainstream (promoting familiar black artists for commercial reproduction and consumption on a mass scale)” and with the rap music and the scored soundtrack working “together in a process of continual clash and merger, not as discrete segments.” (Johnson, V.E., “Polyphony and Cultural Expression: Interpreting Musical Traditions in ‘Do the Right Thing’”, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 2 [Winter, 1993-1994], pp. 18-29) This notion of a double consciousness of the African American experience has been noted as far back as W.E.B. Du Bois, where African-Americans, in a society where they are viewed as outsiders from the main culture, either stay with the black community to better it with links with the white community, or to continue to fend for one’s self within the white community (McKelly, J.C., “The Double Truth, Ruth: *Do the Right Thing* and the Culture of Ambiguity”, *African American Review*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Summer, 1998), pp. 215-227). Does the film offer any reconciliation of these two consciousnesses? Could it possibly? Are they unique to the African-American experience, both as depicted in the film and in real life? Does Sal have a point when he refuses to display African Americans or rather, his preference to display Italian Americans? Does *Buggin’ Out* have a point? How do we, or could we, account for Pino’s split consciousness on African-Americans?

4. What do you make of Sal? Pino and Vito are clearly shown as divided in their views of African-Americans, with Pino clearly racist but Vito being on incredibly good terms with them, as shown with his confiding in Mookie. But Sal is more complex. He is good-natured, trying to keep the peace with the whole neighbourhood, like Da Mayor and Smiley, and he speaks with genuine affection and pride about the fact that “they grew up on my food”. But does this reveal his patronising of the community, a sense that he is saving them, that they need him? And how much of this is economic? We have Sal at numerous times explaining to Pino that this is their livelihood and that it would not be comparable in their neighbourhood. And of course, his explosive dislike of the cultural expressions and the violent response to Radio Raheem, who granted, was less than polite to begin with. Some contemporaneous critics have also mentioned that their sympathies did not lie with Raheem, but with Sal. “We don’t even know Raheem”, was the general sentiment, and more to the point, we don’t particularly like him as he has numerous times displayed himself to be a bully. This pinpoints a larger criticism levelled against the film and Lee, namely that he has failed to “produce well rounded and complex—not to mention positive—black characters.” (Jones, J. “In Sal’s Country” in “What is the Right Thing? A Critical Symposium on Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*”, *Cinéaste*, Vol. 17, No. 4 [1990], pp. 32-39) But that is the point:

Much like any kid that appears in our newspapers, we never really know where these characters have are coming from, and that’s the scary part. Even worse, we are apt to believe that some part of who they are—poor, black, unemployed, trifling—has something to do with their fate. (ibid, p.34)

We don’t see who they are, just the negative aspects that is presented as the reason for them getting in trouble. But Lee’s film by no means gives black characters a free pass, putting on full display many of the negative elements of the African-American communities. (Muwakkil, S., “Spkie Lee and the Image Police” in “What is the Right Thing? A Critical Symposium on Spike Lee’s *Do the*

Right Thing”, *Cinéaste*, Vol. 17, No. 4 [1990], pp. 32-39) Is Sal racist, even if in a positive light? Where did your sympathies lie? Why? Are there any positive characters at all in the film? Is that the point?

5. The film also seems to question this notion of being true to yourself, and this is linked clearly with race and territory. We have Buggin’ Out telling Mookie, after a slight altercation that is quickly remedied, to “Stay Black”. We have Coconut Sid lamenting the opening of a shop by a Korean, and we see numerous confrontations between the storeowners and the customers, culminating with the owner asserting that they are “Black” in order to ease the rage and save the store from a fate similar to Sal’s. And when Clifton is questioned by Buggin’ Out why he bought a house “on my block, in my neighborhood, on my side of the street?” identifying it specifically as a “Black neighborhood” and finally telling Clifton to “go back to Massachusetts” Clifton responds that he “was born in Brooklyn” only to be greeted by mocking scoffs from the whole group who dismiss this as false. And we have Pino questioning Sal about why they keep coming to a neighbourhood where they don’t belong and telling Sal that his friends make fun of him for working in the Black neighbourhood. This marks *Do the Right Thing* within a “decades long discourse on a specific strain of logic in American civil rights history, one involving the particularly constructed ghetto identity of urban Blacks and the ways in which such identity manifests itself in outbursts of violence” (Hanson, P. “The Politics of Inner City Identity in ‘Do the Right Thing’”. *South Central Review*, Vol. 20, No. 2/4 (Summer - Winter, 2003), pp. 47-66 .) It links with Radio Raheem’s take on the love hate dichotomy, which also adds in the constant references to Martin Luther King and Malcolm X in the pictures sold by Smiley, with the final ambiguity coming at the end with the seemingly contradictory quotes from the two relating to the use of violence. Are there parallels in the characters and King and X in the film? Does the film offer any solutions to the problems of race relations in America, or simply add to the decades long discussion? Does it make any pretense to offering solutions? What is the point then?

6. Did Mookie do the right thing in the end? Did anyone? Lee has mentioned that the question “did Mookie do the right thing” is only ever asked by white critics and audiences, claiming that the question has never been asked by black audiences or critics. He asserts that when the question is asked it displays that the person asking is unable to determine the difference between property and a human life. (‘Spike Lee’s Last Word’, special feature on the Criterion Collection DVD [2000]) Sal, although asserting that his anger at the destroyed shop is not economic, also does not express any sympathy for the death of Radio Raheem. Some contemporaneous critics wanted a clear assertion of what was “the right thing”, but others have pointed out that “the beauty in this film is the frustration of never being sure who did do the right thing.” (Jones, “In Sal’s Country”) Is the title meant to be read literally, that is, are we supposed to walk away believing that the actions that transpired are the “right thing”, or is it a polemical tool? Do you feel that the “beauty” of the film is in its frustrating uncertainty? What kind of bearing does this have on the real world events, like with the current spate of police shootings and the Black Lives Matter movement?