

Do the Right Thing

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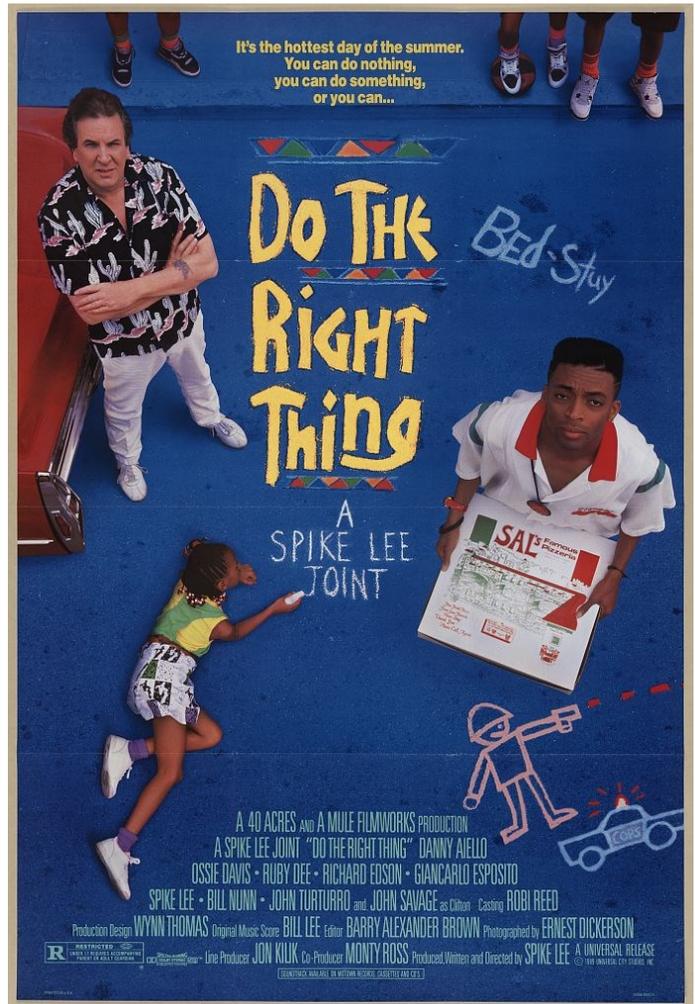
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Spike Lee's most fully realized film, "Do the Right Thing," is urban and American down to its bones. This helps explain why reaction to it was so mixed at the Cannes International Film Festival, where I saw its world premiere in 1989 with an audience of international critics and journalists. Spectators applauded at the end, but their clapping seemed driven more by duty than enthusiasm, as if it were de rigueur to cheer a maverick movie by a spunky black filmmaker even if his message seemed cranky or cryptic. Europeans wondered if its subject was timely—racial unrest is "very 1960s," a West German critic told me—and some Americans criticized it for stirring up discontents that seemed, well, unnecessary in the late 1980s.

Initial reaction in the United States was also mixed. Many hailed the film's energy and complexity, while others criticized its characterizations—are these well-rounded individuals or stereotypical stick figures?—and some accused it of presenting a sanitized portrait of ghetto life.

While the characters of "Do the Right Thing" are certainly etched in bold strokes, I find them as fleshed out as they need to be for this densely structured film. And whatever one thinks of the movie, it can't be accused of irrelevance. Tensions between blacks and whites have diminished but hardly ceased in the years since Lee wrote and directed it, and the root causes of this friction—including poverty, unequal schooling, and police persecution—are inextricably tied to the long tradition of American racism. That tradition is the context in which Lee wrote "Do the Right Thing," drawing on such highly publicized New York incidents as the death of a graffiti artist in police custody and the harassment of African Americans by white rioters in the Howard Beach neighborhood of Queens. (The film is dedicated to four then-recent black victims of white power.)

But there's more to the movie than muckraking anger. One way to approach its deeper meanings is to recall Lee's previous picture, "School Daze," and especially the very unusual ending of that very unusual musical. "School Daze" weaves several seriocomic storylines into a complicated fabric, tracing various aspects of life and love in a black American college. When the time arrives for a resolution of the action, Lee gives us something different. One character rouses the others out of bed and



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assembles them in a group, shouting at them—and at the audience in the theater—two forceful words: "Wake up!"

"Do the Right Thing" begins with those very same words, and they're a key to Lee's intention as a filmmaker, not only in these movies but in his career as a whole. He's not after entertainment for its own sake. Rather, he wants to wake us and shake us into awareness of the racism and misery that are embedded in contemporary urban society. At times his good intentions lead him into simplistic storytelling, as when he becomes a sort of cinematic social worker in parts of "Mo' Better Blues" and "Jungle Fever," and at times his ideas take on such excess energy that they careen almost out of control, as in overstuffed yet exhilarating epics like "Summer of Sam" and "Bamboozled." But at his best he has an extraordinary ability to rethink social and cultural issues in strikingly original motion picture terms.

That's why "Do the Right Thing" dodges the formulas and patterns of conventional Hollywood cinema. Its characters are often abrasive; its language is floridly foul; and it

takes a skeptical view of easily articulated solutions to race-related violence. Yet it's an attractive and even beguiling film in many ways, enriched by humor and intelligence from beginning to end. And for all its iconoclasm, it shows a canny consciousness of the more inventive and freewheeling tropes that Hollywood has come up with in the past, as when a black character gives his own street-smart version of the "love vs. hate" routine enacted by Robert Mitchum in Charles Laughton's classic movie, "The Night of the Hunter."

The more good-natured aspects of "Do the Right Thing" have been a target for its less sympathetic critics. In particular, Lee's portrait of Brooklyn's poor Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood has been panned as a "Sesame Street" version of ghetto life, too clean and polite to be believed. I think this criticism has its own tinge of racism. On any given day in even the worst urban neighborhoods, most folks are just living their lives, not stealing or overdosing or wallowing in dirt and crime. It's true that Lee's characters have more than their share of challenges to meet, and years of ingrained poverty have taken such a toll that some have lost the knack of coping with reality: Check out the three men who sit forever on the corner, commenting on the action like a Greek chorus with a four-letter vocabulary. There's no reason for Lee to exaggerate their plight by throwing in hackneyed views of inner-city misery, though. Their situation speaks for itself, and what it reveals is a credible perspective on slum life that never lapses into shock tactics or cheap sentimentality.

"Do the Right Thing" takes place in and around Sal's Famous Pizzeria, operated by the eponymous Italian American businessman and his two grown sons. It's the hottest day in anyone's memory, and tempers are likely to flare over trifles. That's what happens when a young man named Buggin' Out feels a flare of anger at Sal for not hanging pictures of African American celebrities in the Italian-only "Wall of Fame" that decorates the pizza joint. Add a few more provocations—especially the blaring boom box that music freak Radio Raheem carries everywhere he goes—and you have the ingredients for serious trouble. Sure enough, violence erupts before the day is over, through an intricately structured series of events in which the character meticulously constructed as the "trustworthy" black guy (the delivery man Mookie, played by Lee himself) touches off an incendiary spark that explodes the accommodating attitudes of his black friends along with the smug complacency of his white neighbors.

The climax of "Do the Right Thing" has gotten more attention than any other part of the movie, and from some contemporaneous reviews you'd think Lee's film is as gruesome as a standard Hollywood action picture. In fact, its violence is mild compared with the mayhem unleashed by countless thrillers, westerns, and other genre movies since Sam Peckinpah and company upped the bloodletting ante in the 1960s; and it's not uncommon for such films to have racial implications a lot less progressive than the views embedded in Lee's work.

Nor does "Do the Right Thing" end with violence. Its outbreak of mayhem is followed by a denouement that doesn't resolve the story but offers a series of dialectical propositions that grow out of it. White cops attack a black man. Then infuriated blacks attack the pizzeria. Then the black man who escalated the violence has a partial reconciliation with the pizzeria owner, surprisingly complex in its emotional dynamics. Then two quotations appear: one from Martin Luther King, Jr. saying violence is always self-defeating, and another from Malcolm X saying violence in self-defense may be necessary. These images and words offer no definitive answers to racial problems, any more than the film's title tells us what the "right thing" is supposed to be. They do open the door to thought and dialogue, which is a far more constructive contribution for a movie to make than simply adding to the pile of skin-deep polemics already produced by the culture industry.

The last scenes of "Do the Right Thing" call to my mind the distinction between two kinds of violence drawn by social philosopher Paul Goodman in his book "Drawing the Line." In his view, "natural" violence may be dreadful and destructive, but it's rooted in human nature and erupts spontaneously out of deep-seated drives and emotions—the violence of parents defending their family against physical attack, for instance. By contrast, "unnatural" violence is stirred up artificially from the outside, as when a government incites public frenzy against a distant country that poses no immediate threat. The destruction of property in "Do the Right Thing" seems distressing but altogether "natural" to me. This doesn't mean it's good. But as narrative it's true to past experience in real urban ghettos, and as psychology it's true to the imperfections of human nature when confronted by the short-term stress of immediate provocation and the long-term misery of poverty-plagued urban life. While it's not a pretty picture, it's hardly a despairing one, either.

As perceptive critics have observed in the years since its release, "Do the Right Thing" is a deeply dialectical film in

many ways, from its self-questioning conclusion to its inventive use of basic narrative film techniques. Its music, for instance, is a three-part tapestry that vividly conveys three kinds of consciousness in the Bed-Stuy mix: Rap songs represent the hardcore street folks; romantically-inclined string tunes (anticipating the Aaron Copland score of “He Got Game”) evoke the sophistication of American folk culture; and the jazz/soul/rhythm-and-blues records spun by the disc-jockey character (Mister Señor Love Daddy) carve out an eclectic middle ground between them. The film’s visual style does similar things, as when Lee chooses sharp cuts to separate shots of Sal and Radio Raheem during their disastrous boom box feud—suggesting the formidable gulf that separates these two characters—but uses quick-swinging pans to depict Radio Raheem’s crank-up-the-volume contest with a Hispanic man, suggesting that these two inhabit the same psychological world even if their shared interests are often expressed through contrast and competition.

Much more could be said about the film’s many layers of interest, from its use of interruptive techniques that Bertolt Brecht would have praised to its clever deployment of the Aristotelian narrative unities (place: Sal’s joint; time: the hottest day of the year; action: the inexorable growth of specific race-based animosities). With its ingenious camera work, expressive music score, brash yet indomitable humor, and smartly dialectical structure, “Do the Right Thing” is the richest and most thought-provoking portrait of underclass experience yet painted by an American fiction film.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

David Sterritt is a film critic, author and scholar. He is most notable for his work on Alfred Hitchcock and Jean-Luc Godard, and his many years as the Film Critic for “The Christian Science Monitor,” where, from 1968 until his retirement in 2005, he championed avant garde cinema, theater and music. .