

Media Criticism: Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*

Eliot Dix

Longwood University

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Dr. Waggoner

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### **Media Criticism: Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing***

Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing*, just turned 30 years old in 2019. Three decades have passed since Lee addressed racial inequality in his distinct film making style. This film creates a portrait that causes the audience member to stare racism in the face, and forces them to come to terms with reality. *Do the Right Thing*, takes place in the Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhood in Brooklyn during a scorching hot heat wave in the summer of 1989. The heat wave is symbolic of the existing racial tension and cultural clash existing within the confines of the neighborhood. This film does not follow a typical story structure with distinct rising action that ultimately leads to a climax and falling action. *Do the Right Thing*, is more abstract in it's design. The climax of the film undoubtedly occurs when Radio Raheem is strangled to death by a white police officer, and a riot breaks out leaving Sal's famous pizzeria burnt to ash. It can be easy to see the immediate scenes before the death of Radio Raheem as the build up to this climax, however the entire beginning of the film is slowly displaying the rising racial tensions that ultimately wind up burdening the black community most. Through *Do the Right Thing* Spike Lee examines race relations in our country, painting a picture of a deeply stratified society that systematically keeps black Americans in a disadvantaged position. He addresses specifically themes of gentrification, exploitation, and over policing in a black neighborhood, and the devastating affects these factors have on the black community.

The theme of gentrification is touched on in two main scenes in *Do the Right Thing*. The first being the scene where a character named Buggin' Out gets his sneaker run over by the bicycle of a white man, and confronts him in front of his brown stone. The development of Buggin' Out's character is critical to understand why this scene contained so much anger and tension. Early in the film Buggin' Out is having a slice of pizza at Sal's Famous Pizzeria, a white

owned business in the middle of a black community. While eating he notices Sal's "Wall of Fame," which entirely features photos of white Italian celebrities. The Wall of Fame is high on the wall directly above the sitting area. While Buggin' Out is questioning Sal about why there are no famous black people on the wall, he's placed in the bottom of the frame, underneath the pyramid of white celebrities. Lee is encoding a message of racial stratification by positioning Buggin' Out beneath this shrine of successful whiteness. His request for black celebrities on the wall does not go over well with Sal, which begins Buggin' Out's quest to boycott the restaurant. With this introduction to this character, we recognize that Lee is using him to embody the frustration of black Americans. With this incident fresh in his mind, 'Buggin' Out, encounters the only other white character in the film besides Sal, his sons, and the police officers. Buggin' Out confronts the white man, who is wearing a Larry Bird Celtics jersey. This subtle costume decision by Lee makes reference to the rivalry that the Chicago Bulls and Boston Celtics had at this time in the late 80s. The Celtics were led by the white Larry Bird, and the Chicago Bulls were led by Michael Jordan. This intentional decision makes a nod to the apparent competition between Buggin' Out and the white man. Buggin' Out questions why he would want to live in a black neighborhood, to which the man replies, "I understand that this is a free country, a man can live wherever he wants." Buggin' Out is indignant at this response, replying, "I should fuck you up just for saying that alone!" This scene points out a glaring example of white privilege, the ability to actually live wherever you want. Historically the Federal Housing administration from its inception in the 1930s did not insure mortgages in low income urban neighborhoods where the vast majority of black Americans lived (Fishback et al. 2021). Redlined neighborhoods and housing inequality is commonly cited as one of the main causes of the racial wealth gap and racial inequality. These racially motivated policies are largely to blame for the inception of the

“black neighborhood,” in the first place. This scene in *Do the Right Thing*, makes a comment on gentrification, and the privilege of white home owners. The white character in this scene specifically states that he “owns” the building, when it’s common in low income black neighborhoods for the majority of people to be renters. This scene was one example of Lee establishing the different forces of racial inequality as a contributor to the rising tension that ultimately brings the film to it’s climatic ending.

One of the most famous scenes from Lee’s film occurs after protagonist Mookie confronts Sal’s son Vito about his use of the N word. He makes Vito admit that so many of his favorite artists, athletes, and singers are in fact black, to which Vito responds that they’re different. This tense conversation explodes into a montage of stereotype hurling characters each stating their explicit biases looking directly into the camera. This scene serves as a break in the flow of the film up to this point, as the characters are in a sense breaking the fourth wall, and speaking directly into the camera. This cinematic choice confronts the audience with the implicit biases they have for a certain race or demographic of people. Mookie goes first, insulting and berating Italians, followed by Vito verbally attacking black people. Next is a Puerto Rican character taking aim at the Korean character, then a white cop to the Puerto Ricans, and finally the Korean character directs his rage at Jewish people. This scene addresses the existing intolerance within this diverse community. Throughout the film Lee displays the effect of racism on a structural and systemic level, however this scene approaches discussing racial prejudice, which is a major contributor to the overall forces of inequality. The characters featured in this scene are all portrayed at eye level, with their face taking up the majority of the shot. This was likely done intentionally to display each of them human, while each of them harbours their own explicit bias towards another group of people who are equally as human. Samuel L Jackson

breaks up the flow of insults by saying into the camera that everyone needs to chill. Lee undoubtedly included this scene as another method to increase the pressure on the racial tension powder keg that explodes at the end of the film. By confronting the forces of explicit racial prejudice, Lee continues to display for his audience the various ingredients that eventually wind up creating the circumstances for the death of Radio Raheem.

Raheem's death scene is the explosion of the tension building up throughout the entirety of the film. Every moment Lee used to make comments on systemic racism and racial prejudice up until this point, were used to explain the existing climate that leads to tragic events of police brutality. Radio Raheem and Buggin' Out enter Sal's pizzeria with Raheem's boom box blasting Public Enemy so loud that every character must scream to be heard. Sal's resistance to the music and their qualms about the Wall of Fame in this scene can be seen as a metaphor for the struggle of black voices to be heard. Lee uses intense volume as a cinematic device to build up the strongest point of tension on the precipice of combustion. This scene watches Sal, who was previously depicted as being loving of his black customers, and proud that he was a staple of the community, explode with anger and racial slurs when confronted by Raheem and Buggin' Out. Lee could be making a point about white comfortability and resistance to change when confronted with problems that afflict black Americans.

The momentary silence after Sal smashes Raheem's boom box represents the official break in the tension, where the two quickly engage in a brawl that spills out into the street. The police arrive at the scene and apprehend Raheem, putting him in a choke hold that would eventually lead to his death. The police do not treat this brawl as a two sided fight, profiling only Raheem as the instigator and the source of danger. This method of policing is intended to reflect reality, and the countless acts of injustice committed by the police force against black citizens.

Cries from bystanders and even the other policemen beg the officer choking Raheem to stop, but he continues administering the choke hold until he drops Raheem's lifeless body to the pavement. A shot of Raheem on the ground shows that he fell on his right hand, which has on it a piece of jewelry with "LOVE," across his knuckles. This could perhaps be Lee making a comment on Martin Luther King Jr's message about responding to racial violence peacefully, questioning whether or not Malcolm X's message of meeting violence with self defense could have saved Raheem's life. Lee revisits this question in the credits of the film, where he contrasts the perspectives of these two leaders by showing the audience their juxtaposing quotes.

The Radio Raheem death scene addresses the issue of police brutality, an unchanging issue affecting black citizens that is the main reason *Do the Right Thing*, has remained so relevant in contemporary race conversations. Following the death of Eric Garner at the hands of police, Lee put out a video of shots of Garner struggling for his life intercut with Raheem enduring the same struggle (Bhatia 2020). Experts have concluded that those most aware of unlawful police practices; those in high crime neighborhoods, and the police themselves, have demonstrated that the violation of individual rights is a common feature of contemporary American policing (Miller 1998).

By using the medium of film to offer a commentary on race relations in America, Lee was able to reach a massive audience with his message. By using this fictional story to address non-fictional topics of systemic racism, racial prejudice, and police brutality he is able to increase awareness and participation in the social justice movement. His decisions in cinematography and costume choice further encode messages that portray his main themes throughout the film. Analyzing Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* in contemporary America serves to display the lack of progress and recurrence of the issues he brings to light in the film. He has

continued to make movies that bear these important messages, an example being 'Blackkkklansman' from 2018. *Do the Right Thing* reappeared in theaters on its 30 year anniversary in 2019, which made it especially clear that his criticism of society remains as relevant and poignant as it was in 1989.

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