MIT Student
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Film Notes: *Do the Right Thing*

The director of the film is Spike Lee. The film was released in 1989 and was set to be around that same time in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, NY. It appeared to be shot on location.

Five adjectives or phrases to describe the sense of the city portrayed in the film: vibrant, "diverse" in the sense that different racial and cultural subgroups coexist in the same space but only interact with each other grudgingly and in a hostile manner. We see extras and main characters meander around the same street in the foreground and background; you get the distinct sense that the place is *lived in* in the sense that the entire universe gets distilled into that one street and the inhabitants therein. Maybe because the late-80s is so sentimentalized right now in popular culture, but there seems to be a great fondness and nostalgia that Spike Lee infuses into the space. The community is incredibly tight-knit and everyone knows what each other is doing. Prior to Radio Raheem's death, the police and the black community of the neighborhood have an unspoken agreement not to raise violence against one another (e.g. when that rich man with his vintage open-top car drives by and the kids spray water from the fire hose at it, the police officers purposefully don't do anything about it and there does not appear to be any implicit alliance between the white police officers and the white rich man).

I really, really like Mookie both as a character and as a device for the film. As a black man working at Sal's Famous Pizzeria, he is the bridge between the two groups. He assures Buggin' Out that Vito is "down." He also escorts Buggin' Out out of Sal's when Buggin' Out begins to shout about boycotting the restaurant and angers Sal. Although he initially acts as a mediator and pacifier for the two groups as tensions arise throughout the day, he is also the one who initiates the riots when he throws the trash can through the window of Sal's pizzeria. All he wants to do is "get money, get paid"– he's a pragmatist. He isn't concerned with grand ideas about "love" and "hate" the way Radio Raheem is, nor is he upset about the lack of representation of black people in the photographs on the wall of Sal's pizzeria the way Buggin' Out is. But most crucially, he sees both sides of the situation and makes a judgment call. It's ambiguous whether this act is a "right thing" – the two quotes at the end of the film, one by Martin Luther King, Jr. and one by Malcolm X, are more or less contradictory and suggest that deciding whether Mookie was "right" or "wrong" in throwing the trash can doesn't do the situation justice. Discussions and issues regarding race in America are much more nuanced than that, which is probably the reason why white people who first saw this film in 1989 were so fearful about the film inciting riots for black audience members, because the film doesn't offer easy answers and can't easily be dismissed by the larger public.

I keep wondering why Spike Lee is demonized as a provocateur and a hypocrite in (white) media when I felt that each of the characters in the film was portrayed very empathetically (apart from the Korean grocers, who I feel simultaneously feed into a Long Duck Dong stereotype *and* a model minority stereotype that have no counterpoint the way the black and white characters of the film do). Or why his criticism of gentrification must be neutered by critics who accuse him of causing it. Like Mookie, Lee is also a bridge between two cultures, but as a content creator he also has the burden of representation, and in that sense, he will never win, and he will never be widely accepted (distinction between "acclaimed" as a film director and accepted as a human being in society).

One remarkable scene is where the fourth wall is broken and individuals of different races go back and forth brutally articulating racist insults at the camera as the camera presses up to their faces. It speaks to the stylized nature of the film, because the scene appears out of no where and without any explanation, but it universalizes the animosity that exists between racial groups. The fact the characters speak directly into the camera makes it feel as though the movie pauses its make-believe fictional acting stuff and distills all the racial tensions that exist in the real world right now and makes us stare at it directly in the face. Diversity and heterogeneity in the city doesn't enable an enriching and empathetic and flourishing environment. Diversity and heterogeneity in the city creates a hierarchy and a value system in which oppression and hatred will persist until the oppressed are forced to leave the city, or "white flight" occurs if the oppressed become too great in number.

The neighborhood reminds me of the Bicycle Thief's neighborhood. I remember when the thief started having a seizure, the crowd pressed around him to help him, and to get rid of Ricci. Similarly, when Buggin' Out's shoe gets cuffed by the white cyclist, a crowd of supporters surrounds Buggin' as well.

Two questions for class discussion: do you think the portrayal of the Korean grocers lessens the potency of the race discussion posed by Lee? Do you think Buggin' Out's criticism of the Italian-American pictures on the wall of a pizzeria is valid?

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