

## Do the Right Thing (1989)

### Major Credits:

Director: Spike Lee

Screenplay: Spike Lee

Cinematographer: Ernest Dickerson

Cast: Danny Aiello (Sal), Spike Lee (Mookie), Ossie Davis (Da Mayor), Ruby Dee (Mother Sister), Richard Edson (Vito), Giancarlo Esposito (Buggin Out), Bill Nunn (Radio Raheem), John Turturro (Pino), Joie Lee (Jade)

### Background:

Spike Lee's third film established him as a major American director of after the interest generated by *She's Gotta Have It* (1986). Despite such significant works as *Malcolm X* (1992), *Clockers* (1995), *Summer of Sam* (1999), and *25<sup>th</sup> Hour* (2002), *Do the Right Thing* has remained his most successful film in terms of both popularity and critical acclaim. Several factors may account for the decline of his reputation since *Do the Right Thing*: he chooses controversial subjects that record the variety of black American experience; his primary appeal to African-American audiences limits the commercial potential of his films; he is an unapologetic entrepreneur and self-promoter; his persona as "Mars Blackman" in a series of superb commercials with Michael Jordan that he directed for Nike as well as his sometimes outlandish presence courtside at New York Knicks games have somewhat blurred his serious artistic intentions and considerable talent. A graduate of Morehouse College in Atlanta and New York University Film School, Lee has steadily engaged in a creative project of exploring concerns and lifestyles of the black community in an increasingly diverse but persistently racist America. As a filmmaker, Lee tries to "walk the walk": he successfully overcame the efforts of the predominantly white technical and trade unions that tried to prevent him from hiring black nonunion crew members, even though they themselves lacked a sufficient number of black union members.

### Cinematic Qualities:

*Do the Right Thing* remains the most powerful and controversial representation of Lee's recurrent themes to date; it is also perhaps his most cinematically stylish film. Although he has subsequently made documentaries and historical films in the mode of realism, Lee conceived of *Do the Right Thing* primarily as an expressionist work. The Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, an appalling ghetto of drug abuse, prostitution, and condemned tenement buildings, is thus deliberately depicted to resemble Sesame Street more than any actual site of urban blight—despite being shot on location. Note the prominence of primary colors to give the film a story book look and the simplification of characterization into immediately recognizable types. In Lee's re-presentation, the black ghetto becomes a black neighborhood.

The opening musical sequence sets in motion a complex sound track that reverberates throughout the film. The soulful tenor saxophone that plays a version of

“Lift Every Voice and Sing” over the Universal logo immediately gives way to the competing rap of Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power” while Rosie Perez vigorously performs in the sexist style of an MTV video. Mediating between jazz and rap is the soulful sound of Señor Love Daddy on FM 108, the neighborhood radio station.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Lee ends *Do the Right Thing* with apparently contradictory quotations from Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X that advocate, respectively, non-violent resistance as a means of social change and retaliatory violence as a means of self defense. Does the film take sides between these two opposing views? Does it attempt to reconcile them? What is “the right thing” for oppressed urban minorities?
2. What is the significance of Mookie’s destructive act that precipitates the climactic violence? Is his motive to protect Sal or simply to vent his frustration? Is the ending of the film socially responsible?
3. In one of the film’s most celebrated scenes, Lee interrupts the narrative to allow various ethnic characters, Mookie included, to spout racist epithets directly into the camera. What is the function of this Brechtian sequence? Does it tend to mitigate the particular cultural racism directed against blacks?
4. Lee was criticized for his portrayal of black characters as cultural stereotypes while Sal seems a relatively complex characterization. Is there a justification for the film’s apparent lapse into caricature?