

Fear of a Black Cinema

Amy Taubin
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FYI

Amy Taubin has been a film critic for the *Village Voice* since 1987 and is contributing editor of *Sight and Sound*. In addition to writing about film, Taubin has also acted on stage and in film. She has appeared in avant-garde films, among them Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) and Andy Warhol's *Couch and The Thirteen Most Beautiful Women* (1964).

Top-ten lists: fun to read, painful to write. Always sucker myself into doing them on the grounds it would be cowardly not to. It's not the fear that colleagues and readers will mock my choices that makes the task so fraught with anxiety. ("They're all gonna laugh at you," as Carrie's mother warned her; and shouldn't it give me pause that *Carrie* gets shut out year after year from my list and everyone else's?) No, it's being limited to ten—the eternal frustrating ten. Ten might have been reasonable 50 years ago when cinema had been around for only half a century and few critics had access to film cultures other than those of the U.S., Western Europe and occasionally the Soviet Union. But even those early lists were possible only with the tacit agreement to exclude entire categories of cinema—no avant-garde films, perhaps a token documentary, and, of course, forget about the tawdry glories of exploitation.

Now, however, with the vast increase in production and with films from virtually every country on the globe available in specialized theaters, ten is out of the question. This time around, shall I bump Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, a formally stringent harbinger of a feminist cinema that is still slow in coming, in order to accommodate Zacharias Kunuk's

The Fast Runner (Atanarjuat), the first-ever Inuit theatrical feature, which employs digital video, the medium of the future, to record a myth of origins set in a primal white-on-white landscape far stranger and more ravishing than that of *Star Wars*? Completed in 2001, the first year of the new millennium, *The Fast Runner* suggests that cinema has not lost its capacity for radical renewal. But alas, the list is filled, and so I rationalize the omission with a new rule—no films that have not stood the test of time for at least 25 years—which I impulsively break with the last-minute addition of David Cronenberg's as yet unreleased *Spider*. What can I say? Cronenberg's ingenious deployment of first-person narrative in a medium that's characteristically resistant to subjectivity seems a greater—and more perverse—achievement than Kunuk's epic action-adventure. (Since list-making is a perverse endeavor, perversity has the advantage.) My other even more bizarre rules: I categorically exclude silent cinema except for its last stand in Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*, comedy (thus slighting pleasure at its most direct) and any film not produced in Europe or North America (thus reinforcing a hegemony I claim to despise). It's a contortionist's nightmare, which could be solved by increasing the number to a plausible 25.

In which case, Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* is guaranteed a place. How could it not be, since it established Lee as the most dedicated resistance fighter to infiltrate the Hollywood system—the filmmaker who put the fraught and disavowed issues of race and racism at the center of his films and refused to be ghettoized for doing so? Released in 1989, *Do the Right Thing* was Lee's third feature and the first to deal with the relationships between black characters (the residents of a single block in the Brooklyn neighborhood of [Bedford-Stuyvesant])

and white characters (the owner of the local pizzeria and his two sons, and the police).

Made after eight years of Reaganism had rolled back the gains of the Civil Rights movement and during the summer that the first George Bush was making his bid for the presidency with the help of the blatantly racist Willie Horton ads, *Do the Right Thing* was directly inspired by a series of incidents of racial violence and police brutality. There was Eleanor Bumpers, a very large, very likely psychotic black woman who was shot to death when she waved a knife at cops who'd come to arrest her. The cops claimed they acted in self-defense, but considering that the first bullet tore off Bumpers' hand, it was hard to understand why they felt obliged to keep firing. There was also Michael Stewart, a graffiti artist who was arrested for defacing subway property and strangled to death in a police chokehold. (The cops maintained he had a heart attack.)

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At the climax of *Do the Right Thing* one of the neighborhood teenagers is similarly strangled while struggling with police. His death precipitates a riot that ends with the pizzeria burnt to the ground. To say the film struck a nerve would be an understatement. Lee was attacked for inciting black youth to riot in the streets, for sabotaging the upcoming mayoral campaign of David Dinkins, the African-American opponent of 12-year incumbent Ed Koch, and for single-handedly turning back the clock to the

fiery racial confrontations of the 1960s. It was not only members of the white establishment press who were outraged; Lee caught heat from black intellectuals including conservative black writer Stanley Crouch, who accused him of "proto-fascism." The racism inherent in the attacks on *Do the Right Thing* is evidenced in the fact that most of the critics were more horrified by the destruction of white-owned property than by the death of the black teenager, which was almost never mentioned. As Lee has frequently noted, none of the critics who attacked him apologized when Dinkins, indeed, defeated Koch and New York did not go up in flames. It was, rather, South Central L.A. which, a few years later, was burnt and looted; the cause, however, was not a movie but the acquittal of the cops in the Rodney King case. And, of course, police brutality continues unabated (witness the killing of Amadou Diallo and the torture of Abner Louima at the hands of the NYPD).

The noise surrounding *Do the Right Thing* propelled Lee on to the covers of *Time*, *Newsweek* and various other mainstream media showcases (a neither unwelcome nor, one imagines, entirely unstrategized development), but it also obscured the brilliance of the film itself: its bold, ingenious formal hybridity, its unforced emotional range from exuberance to despair, the way its individual images and actions are packed with contradictory meanings. The setting is a single 24-hour day—the hottest day of the summer—on a single street in one of Brooklyn's poor, black neighborhoods. The title sequence—Rosie Perez dancing to Public Enemy's "Fight the Power"—encapsulates the theatrical style and confrontational strategy of the whole. Perez is part prize-fighter and part hootchy-kootchy dancer, but even when she's bumping and grinding, she's too fierce and self-contained to be read as a seductress. The dance is more political than sexual provocation, as if Lee were baiting the feminist critics, who dismissed his first feature *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) as male fantasy, to have another go at him.

In a series of fast-cut vignettes we're introduced to the residents of the block. Mister Señor Love Daddy (Samuel L. Jackson), the local-radio DJ, watches over the neighborhood like an angelic referee as he spins records and issues advice. The narrative is framed between his morning wake-up call and his final admonition to "register to vote." The film has more than its share of caustic observers. Da Mayor (Ossie Davis), an elderly drunk, stumbles up and down the street and romantically yearns for Mother-Sister (Ruby Dee), perpetually glaring down at him from her upper-floor window. At the end of the block, just past the Korean-owned grocery store and the Italian-owned pizzeria, sit three beer-bellied middle-aged men whose sole purpose in life is to provide a running commentary on their own bodily functions and everyone else's problems, particularly those of their busier, although not necessarily more purposeful, neighbors. There's a trio of young men with fragile, stunted identities—Buggin'

Out (Giancarlo Esposito), Smiley (Roger Guenveur Smith) and Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn), the designated martyr who looks as menacing as NBA player Patrick Ewing in the post but clings to his oversized boom-box as his only hedge against invisibility. Their inchoate anger and frustrated desire for agency eventually focuses, with tragic consequences, on Sal (Danny Aiello), the paternalistic proprietor of the pizzeria, and his two sons (John Turturro and Richard Edson).

"Always do the right thing," says Da Mayor, buttonholing Mookie (Spike Lee), who's on his way to deliver a pizza and can't believe Da Mayor has interrupted him mid-stride with such an obvious piece of advice. "Mookie does not have heroic stature" was Wim Wenders' lame explanation of why the Cannes jury decided to award the Palme d'Or to Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies, and videotape* rather than to *Do the Right Thing* (as if James Spader's

impotent video freak did). There are no heroes in *Do the Right Thing*, but Mookie and Sal are more realist constructions than the film's other characters, who are so markedly one-dimensional they seem to have been lifted from a medieval morality play. The passive-aggressive Mookie has two women in his life—his beautiful, introspective sister Jackie (Joie Lee) and his girlfriend Tina, who's even more pugilistic in her speech than in her dancing. (She's the woman in the opening sequence.) But it's Mookie's father-son relationship with Sal, complicated by race and economic dependence, that becomes intolerable for him. When Mookie, in a

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rage at Sal for being instrumental in Radio Raheem's death, hurls a garbage can through the pizzeria's plate-glass facade, thus precipitating the riot, it's an act of liberation and destruction—over-determined all around.

But it's also a futile act, since it has no political context. Anyone who thinks this film could inspire violence is seeing their own paranoia and not what's on screen. Watching Mookie sitting shellshocked on the curb as the pizzeria burns, and Smiley tip-toeing through the embers to paste his fetishised Xeroxed image of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King on the skeleton of the wall which Sal had dedicated to curling stock photos of Italian-American celebrities, one feels overwhelmingly sadness—that the moment of a political movement with visionary, charismatic leaders and an organized strategy to "fight the power" is past and nothing has replaced it. Lee says he's been asked many times—although never by an African-

American—if Mookie did the right thing. The more interesting question is, where does he go from here? On the depressing morning after, Mookie and Sal forge an uneasy truce based on their mutual knowledge that they'll never see each other again. Sal asks Mookie what he's going to do, and Mookie, who was introduced counting his cash, answers as he walks away, "Get paid." Even as one finds relief in the open ending, one has to wonder if Mookie is going to follow the path of Spike Lee, who may have final cut on his films, but also has learned to make strategic accommodations to the "powers that be." Or will he choose a more vampiristic form of black entrepreneurship? In Lee's *Clockers* (1995) Delroy Lindo's neighborhood drug honcho Rodney, when asked why he sells crack to kids, answers, just as flatly as Mookie, "to get paid."

Part hip-hop musical, *Do the Right Thing* has deeper roots in the agit-prop theater of the 1930s and 1940s. "Fight the Power" is the film's anthem, but the soundtrack is dominated by William J. E. Lee's orchestral jazz score, its harmonies, rhythms and textures echoing the stage-musical scores of Marc Blitzstein and Aaron Copland. Lee may have fond memories of the film version of *Bye Bye Birdie* (1963), but *Do the Right Thing* is a lot closer to Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*, the 1938 musical about organized labor that Orson Welles directed on Broadway. And it's Welles' combination of theatrical showmanship and cinematic confidence that Lee seems to have absorbed here. Even the swooping, gliding crane shots have a theatrical feel, the sensation you get when you're so riveted by

something on stage that it's as if you've been physically transported from your balcony seat into the middle of the action.

Do the Right Thing was shot on a real Brooklyn street, and the buildings have a solidity no set could provide. On the other hand, the action is choreographed as if the street were a stage. Performers zip on and off as they would in a vaudeville revue. Lee juxtaposes fragments of scenes, isolating the revealing glance, gesture, word. Differing wildly in tone and style, the fragments are hung on a single thread of mounting tension. A trio of characters—one black, one white, one Asian—look straight into the camera as they read off a list of ethnic and racial slurs, enunciating every syllable as in a spelling contest. Mookie and Pino, Sal's overtly racist son, watch the ever so slightly flirtatious interplay between Sal and Mookie's sister from opposite angles and with mirrored emotions.

Had the space not been so theatricalized, the conceit that this one street is a microcosm of the social order (and specifically of race relations) would have frayed. We would have wondered why no one ventured outside its confines or how a dozen brownstones could house enough hungry pizza eaters to keep Mookie on the run for an entire day. The fusion of realism and theatricality not only generates aesthetic sparks, it suggests the complicated interplay between race as the bedrock of everyday life and race as a spectacle (the passing parade). As Mister See or Love Daddy is wont to say: "And that's the triple truth, Ruth."