SPIKE LEE'S AMERICA

DAVID STERRITT

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America Through the Lens

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For Mikita
and Craig
and Jeremy and Tanya

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INTRODUCTION: CHALLENGING QUESTIONS, NO EASY ANSWERS

Barack Obama doesn't mention it often, but his relationship with Spike Lee's cinema has a personal side. "Our first movie was *Do the Right Thing*, which had just come out," Michelle Obama told a CNN reporter shortly before her husband's inauguration. "That was his cultural side . . . he was pulling out all the stops." Beyond this folksy first-date scenario, an old Obama friend called the film a lasting favorite of the president. Why does Obama rarely talk about it, then? In a contribution to The Root, an African-American website of politics and culture, commentator Dayo Olopade hypothesized that the tough-minded, sometimes abrasive politics embraced by Lee in the late 1980s are "awkwardly matched to the president's smooth, carefully cultivated centrism and nonthreatening demeanor," adding that "the first couple's professed distaste for dwelling too much on race" might also be at work.

There appears to be a paradox here: the movie that a politician feels the need to shy away from is the most widely respected movie its director has ever made, and easily the most popular as well. But there is really no paradox at all. First released in 1989 to a chorus of cheers, boos, celebrations, and anxieties, *Do the Right Thing* speaks to wide and diverse audiences today for the same reason it disturbs professional centrists and compromisers – because it raises and examines intractable American problems but *refuses to offer facile solutions* or to wish them away in the feel-good manner that comes so easily to Hollywood cinema. In short, it's an anomaly in American film – a genuinely thoughtful, profoundly dialectical, aesthetically groundbreaking art picture that poses difficult, squirm-

inducing sociopolitical questions in terms that are instantly understandable by people along the entire spectrum of American racial and ethnic identity.

Not all of Spike Lee's joints are as penetrating and original as *Do the Right Thing*. (He calls his pictures "joints," which he defines as a "New York word" meaning whatever you want it to mean.) Nor did he singlehandedly launch African-American cinema into a new and unprecedented era; as media scholar Jacqueline Bobo shows (427),[1] films made by black directors or geared toward black audiences fared well at the box office both before and after *She's Gotta Have It* made its big splash in 1986:

1984 *Purple Rain* (dir. Albert Magnoli, dist. Warner Brothers) – Cost: $7 million; Gross: $69 million

1985 *Brother from Another Planet* (dir. John Sayles, dist. Cinecom) – Cost: $.3 million; Gross: $5 million

1987 *Hollywood Shuffle* (dir. Robert Townsend, dist. Samuel Goldwyn Company) – Cost: $.4 million; Gross: $7 million

1988 *School Daze* (dir. Spike Lee, dist. Columbia) – Cost: $6 million; Gross: $14 million

1989 *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka* (dir. Keenen Ivory Wayans, dist. United Artists) – Cost: $3 million; Gross: $15 million
Do the Right Thing (dir. Spike Lee, dist. MCA/Universal) – Cost: $6.5 million; Gross: $33 million *Lean on Me* (dir. John Avildsen, dist. Warner Brothers) – Cost: n/a; Gross: $28 million

1990 *Harlem Nights* (dir. Eddie Murphy, dist. Paramount) – Cost: $50 million; Gross: $59.8 million (as of March 1990)
House Party (dir. Reginald Hudlin, dist. New Line Cinema) – Cost: $2.5 million; Gross: $22 million (as of June 1990)

Lee's intervention in contemporary cinema has been tremendously important, but it has not always been excellent in quality or even effective in reaching its target

audience. In this book I look at his failures – some just disappointing, a few positively dismal – as well as his successes.

The key point is that most of Lee's movies set forth pointed challenges to conventional ideas of what roles filmmaking, popular culture, and racial discourse are supposed to play in American society. Lee's very career amounts to such a challenge, for that matter – he is the only black filmmaker in history to sustain a major presence in American film over a period of decades, and his output during that time has been both varied and profuse, comprising almost fifty theatrical features, short films, and TV movies and episodes as director, almost as many as producer, and more than a dozen each as screenwriter and actor. His music videos have been commissioned by everyone from Public Enemy and Michael Jackson to Tracy Chapman and Chaka Khan, and he has directed commercials for Nike Air Jordans and American Express, among other clients. He has received two Academy Award nominations – for the original screenplay of *Do the Right Thing* and for the 1997 feature documentary *4 Little Girls*, shared with Sam Pollard, who coproduced it with him. He won an Emmy Award nomination for coproducing *4 Little Girls* and received two Emmys for directing and coproducing the 2006 documentary *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*. He has won prizes, honors, and nominations at the Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Locarno, and Valladolid film festivals, among others; awards from critics' organizations in Chicago, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas; an honorary César Award in France and a special BAFTA award from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts in the United Kingdom; similar honors from the Independent Spirit, Gotham, and Image Awards; two Golden Globe nominations for *Do the Right Thing*; and this is only a very partial list. In short, he is among the most important and influential filmmakers of our time.

He is also a deeply personal and quintessentially American filmmaker who crafts his movies from the stuff of his own life and the lives of others whom he's met, observed, and interacted with over the years. His original roots are in Atlanta, where he was born in 1957. The family moved to Brooklyn when Spike was still an infant, settling in the downscale Fort Greene neighborhood. He returned to Atlanta for college, but it was during a summer vacation back home that he decided what his profession would be. Roaming around New York City with a Super 8 camera in hand, he envisioned himself trying to "capture the richness of African-American culture that I can see, just standing on the corner, or looking out my window every day" (Lindo 165). That idea has guided his career, which is dedicated to exploring the life, times, ideas, and actions of contemporary America – the comic and the tragic, the enlightened and the backward, the best, the worst, and the ugliest – in all their dizzying variety.

Lee's allegiance to African-American culture has not precluded an acute engagement with other aspects of the American scene at large. While moviegoers rightly regard him as first and foremost a black filmmaker, his artistic practice ranges far and wide through the American experience: *Do the Right Thing* is about Italian-American storekeepers in an African-American neighborhood; *Summer of Sam* (1999) centers on Italian-American characters throughout; *Jungle Fever* (1991) deals with romance between the races; *25th Hour* (2002) and *Inside Man* (2006) have predominantly white casts. In these and other films with major white characters, moreover, Lee's insights into their folkways, mores, and mindsets are no less trenchant than the understandings of black culture he displays in movies centering on African-American communities. One of the secrets of his success is his intuitive awareness that African-Americans and Italian-Americans and *Anything*-Americans are socially and psychologically grounded in both

parts of their hyphenated racial/ethnic designations: they are African or Italian or Anything by ancestry and they are Americans by birth, residence, or both. Lee's steady alertness to the cultural complexities arising from this doubleness of identity plays a crucial role in his films' ability to touch, move, entertain, and occasionally infuriate such a broad array of viewers. Collectively his films present an expansive, nuanced, proudly opinionated, richly multifaceted portrait of American society, with a particular focus on issues of class, race, and urban life.

This book explores Lee's career to date, from his beginnings as a no-budget independent to his plans for *Oldboy*, slated for release in 2013. My primary focus is the sophisticated representation of American culture, politics, and daily life that begins to form in his early works and continues to deepen and mature (with backward steps and stumbles along the way) through the present day. After this introductory chapter I discuss the production histories, stories, messages, and reception of his films, exploring the topics and ideas that interest Lee and the ways in which his characteristic style allows for an effective balance of narrative variety and aesthetic consistency. I look at the limitations as well as the strengths of his creative personality, focusing mostly on his theatrical features, since I find his documentaries and filmed-theater works a generally unimaginative lot, however fascinating their subjects may be in themselves.

Among the major subjects of the chapters to come are Lee's background in Brooklyn and his reasons for becoming a filmmaker; the early features – *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) and *School Daze* (1988) – that aim satirical darts at African-American idiosyncrasies; the breakthrough to a mass audience with *Do the Right Thing*; the continuing concern with social and political issues in such films as the antidrug drama *Jungle Fever*, the large-scale biopic *Malcolm X* (1992), the topical comedy-drama *Get on the Bus* (1996),

and the take-no-prisoners media satire *Bamboozled* (2000); the treatment of different lifestyles in *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), which enters the jazz world, *He Got Game* (1998), a drama about athletics and commercialism, and *Summer of Sam*, about an Italian-American community in a troubled time; the compassion for urban youth manifested in *Crooklyn* (1994) and *Clockers* (1995), contrasted with Lee's failure to create three-dimensional female characters in *Girl 6* (1996) and *She Hate Me* (2004); the mixed success of Lee's most recent features, from the stunningly strong *25th Hour* to the muddled overkill of *Miracle at St Anna* (2008); and his part-time occupation as a big-studio director, beginning with *Inside Man* but stalled since the collapse of his effort to obtain studio backing for a sequel to that film, which has been his most financially successful.

It is a given that not everyone agrees on the merits of Lee's movies. Armond White, perhaps America's most widely known African-American film and culture critic, has often dished out less-than-favorable assessments, as when he told *LA Weekly* reporter Erin J. Aubry in 1999 that Spike is primarily a "first-rate marketer" who "knows what a young audience wants, and . . . supplies it." Lee chooses "hot topics" such as basketball and interracial dating, White continued, "but that doesn't mean you break ground. Barbara Walters picks hot topics every day. The pretense of seriousness doesn't mean you're serious" (2). Amiri Baraka, the African-American poet and essayist, said that for him Lee represented "a recognizable type and trend in American society," to wit, "the quintessential buppie, almost the spirit of the young, upwardly mobile, Black, petit bourgeois professional," more concerned with opportunism than with thinking through a coherent political stance (Strausbaugh 269). In a *Village Voice* supplement devoted to *Do the Right Thing*, the influential black commentator Stanley Crouch wrote under the headline "Do the Race Thing: Spike Lee's Afro-Fascist Chic," calling the film "the sort of rancid fairy

tale one expects of a racist" (Crouch 73). Crouch's claim that Lee embraces a "fascist" aesthetic is strangely similar to Pauline Kael's famous charges against director Don Siegel and star Clint Eastwood, whose box-office hit *Dirty Harry* (1971) struck her as a "remarkably single-minded attack on liberal values" that brings out the "fascist potential" in the action genre (148), and against director Sam Peckinpah, whose melodrama *Straw Dogs* (1971) seemed to her "the first American film that is a fascist work of art" (M. Fine 210). Like those great directors of an older generation, Lee brings out fierce emotions in those who cannot or will not get onto his distinctive wavelength.

Themes

Lee's body of work has three recurring themes. One is his determination to carve out and maintain a resolutely independent presence in a film industry almost entirely controlled by white men with big money. The second is the robust sociopolitical awareness that inflects and informs all but a handful of his productions, lending them additional depth and relevance, and occasionally a touch of social-worker moralizing that reveals a surprisingly conservative streak in his creative personality. The third is what I consider the defining characteristic of Spike Lee's cinema – its continual willingness to raise hard questions and problems confronting contemporary America without claiming to have the illusory solutions and make-believe answers that mainstream movies constantly peddle. Lee's pictures are designed to challenge and provoke us, not ease our minds or pacify our emotions. It's no accident that the last words of *School Daze* and the first words of *Do the Right Thing* are the same, presenting the core message of Spike's career in two emphatic syllables: "*Wake up!"*

As a white critic analyzing the career of America's preeminent black filmmaker, I approach Lee's films as

contributions not only to African-American culture but to *American* culture in the broadest, most inclusive sense. Some of his movies – *School Daze* and *Bamboozled*, for instance – obviously convey different and more nuanced messages to black audiences than to white ones, and I can't claim to experience these films in the same ways African-American moviegoers do. But culture is no respecter of borders and boundaries; a film or TV show or magazine aimed at one community will quickly cross into other communities (if it's any good) and spark additional kinds of dialogue, discussion, and debate, taking on new and different meanings that their creators might never have intended or expected. "Black popular culture is not just black," the African-American film scholar Manthia Diawara observes,

> it is also produced through an artistic medium: musical genres and film genres. It is . . . the critic's task to learn these genres and to engage them in discussions about the artists. While anybody can criticize a Spike Lee film, it seems to me that the significant criticisms should involve a degree of identification with the argument of the artist and the genre in which the film is produced. (Ross et al. 3)

I concur. Taking my first viewing of *She's Gotta Have It* in 1986 as an example, I found it an accessible and likable picture that spoke to me as a moviegoer with eclectic tastes, a reviewer quite familiar with international film culture, a youngish man with a soft spot for stories of youthful romance and lively, attractive heroines, a male with strong allegiance to the modern feminist movement, and a white male with memories of the 1960s civil-rights movement and a conviction that color-based bigotry had been – and still was, in slightly less virulent forms – the original sin and ongoing blight that must somehow, someday be expiated and redressed if the so-called "American dream" is ever to become something other than a sour, hypocritical delusion. I have no doubt that aspects of *She's Gotta Have It* escaped me in 1986 and continue to

escape me now that I am more than a quarter-century older but as white and male as I ever was. Feature films are enormously complicated entities, though, and the ever-shifting perspectives and mindsets of us imperfect mortals preclude *everyone* from grasping *all* the meanings of *any* film. That includes the people who make the movies in the first place; many a towering auteur has told me or one of my academic or journalistic colleagues how completely he or she failed to recognize what a particular film was *really* about at the very time it was being written, directed, and released.[2]

Taking this reasoning one more step, it is also true that Lee's films have been sympathetically and intelligently received by viewers who probably have less in common with him than I do, such as white women – an unexpected group, perhaps, since creating strong female characters has not been one of Lee's strong points. One such supporter is the author and commentator Sarah Vowell, who opines that Lee's movies may be "hard" and "exasperating," but gets his American ethos exactly right:

> Lee's ambitious approach is intensely democratic. His mosaic storytelling impulse, aided by his talent and ability at choosing singular actors, feels like what America is supposed to feel like. The citizens of his cities are not faceless, nameless representatives of the masses. They are unique individuals. . . . Ultimately, Lee's films are never going to be about any one thing, race included. They're art, not politics, and the responsibility of art is to the story, to the image, to whatever the artist himself cares about.

Writing about *Inside Man*, film critic Stephanie Zacharek zeroes in on Spike's indefatigable New York sensibility:

> He has a feel for the city that relatively few other filmmakers do, a knack for capturing not just the things people say to each other and the way they say them, but the way the city seems to be carried – maybe even powered – by the rhythm of their overlapping sentences: That symphony of speech is the city's greatest source of vitality.

Commenting on Lee for the British magazine *Sight and Sound*, the American critic Amy Taubin calls him "the most

dedicated resistance fighter to infiltrate the Hollywood system – the film-maker who put the fraught and disavowed issues of race and racism at the centre of his films and refused to be ghettoised for doing so" (26).[3] While others – female and male alike – find muchto criticize, dislike, and even deplore in Spike Lee's cinema, his eagerness and ability to reach audiences across sociocultural boundaries is a sign that his portrayal of America is insightful, authentic, and true.

In discussing Lee's movies from my own necessarily white perspective I'm also thinking of a passage near the beginning of *Spike Lee: That's My Story and I'm Sticking to It*, an autobiographical "as told to" book by Kaleem Aftab, a London-based writer and producer.[4] "To pigeonhole Spike Lee on the grounds of his race would be to inflict a great injustice," Aftab writes, arguing that Lee is better seen as "a quintessential New Yorker: whether . . . watching basketball games courtside at Madison Square Garden, employing the city as the primary location for most of his films or providing his oft-reported commentaries on . . . politics and life." Shortly after these remarks, however, Aftab contends that Lee's reaction to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, demonstrated that "in both his personal life and his work" Lee cannot be portrayed "as a New Yorker," since he is an integral part of something larger still, "the cultural fabric of America" (3). I agree with Aftab that it's unjust and inaccurate to stereotype any community – New Yorkers, or Americans, or those shocked and outraged by mass murder – on the basis of race, religion, sexuality, or the other markers used by bigots to separate Us from Them in hazy, lazy, arbitrary ways. And this is a persistent message of Lee's movies, crystallized with special precision by the scenes in *Do the Right Thing* and *25th Hour* where slurs and venom are hurled at the camera with a velocity and force that render them hyperbolically absurd in the former film, bitter and repellent in the latter.

I've known Spike since the 1980s and we've talked many times, informally and in interviews for print and media outlets; he has never hesitated to speak about race in plainspoken, no-nonsense terms, and he has never hinted at the notion that a white person might be less qualified than a black one to discuss the subject, remembering of course that the social, cultural, and political experiences of white people unavoidably lack the stink of racist affliction that America has forced on black people throughout its history. All of which underscores the point that Spike Lee is an American artist as well as an African-American one, and that his success in using mass media to reach a sweeping array of black and non-black Americans – plus followers in other countries around the world – opens his work for discussion by observers and critics of every kind. This is the spirit in which I look at, think about, and comment on his usually exciting, sometimes exasperating, invariably stimulating and energizing American movies.

1

THE EARLY JOINTS

Shelton Jackson Lee, nicknamed Spike by his mother as an infant, entered the world in Atlanta on March 20, 1957. His mother was Jacquelyn Shelton Lee, a schoolteacher, and his father was Bill Lee, a musician. Deciding he could have a more successful career if he lived in Chicago, the "jazz Mecca" of the period, Bill Lee moved the family there, and then joined the throng of jazz musicians who relocated to New York in the late fifties. Putting down stakes in Brooklyn, the family settled first in Crown Heights, then in Cobble Hill – where they were the first African-Americans to live – and then in Fort Greene, a neighborhood seen by many outsiders at that time as less than desirable, if not actually dangerous or disreputable. Spike's mother was an important influence on his childhood, exposing him and his siblings to mainstream and African-American culture by way of books, plays, museums, and art exhibitions.

Music was an important part of the picture as well, and Spike sometimes heard his father play the bass at the Blue Note and other New York clubs. His three younger siblings – sister Joie, born in 1962, and brothers David and Cinqué, born in 1961 and 1966 – went to Saint Ann's School in Brooklyn, a predominantly white private institution where their mother had become the first African-American teacher. Ever independent, though, Spike had already chosen to attend the John Dewey High School, a public school in the Coney Island neighborhood of Brooklyn with a largely black student body. Ever consistent, moreover, after graduating in 1975 he enrolled at the historically black, all-male

Morehouse College in Atlanta, where his grandfather and father (a classmate of Martin Luther King Jr. there) had gone. His tuition was paid by his grandmother, Zimmie Shelton, an alumna of the all-female Spelman College across the street from Morehouse, which Spike's mother had also attended.

Spike Starts Out

Seeing a lot of movies for diversion after his mother's sudden death in 1977, Spike became seriously interested in the possibilities of film for the first time. "I had gotten a Super 8 camera," he recalled later, "so I spent the whole summer just going around New York City and filming stuff. That was really when I decided that I wanted to be a filmmaker" (Lindo 165). Back at Morehouse with two years still to go for his degree in mass communication, he continued his experiments and made *Last Hustle in Brooklyn*, his debut short, before graduating in 1977. Returning to New York, he put an official stamp on his commitment to film, becoming one of very few black students in the graduate film program of the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, where he spent three years earning an MFA in production. He was not overly fond of NYU, to put it delicately: professors there questioned his grasp of "film grammar," and he sensed an unspoken racial bias in their criticisms. "Any time a black person is in a white environment," he remarked later, "and they are not always happy – smiling, eating cheese [–] then [others] say he's a militant or has an attitude." His first-year film, *The Answer* (1980), did not change that impression. Discussing it with Nelson George, an African-American critic, Lee described it as the story of "a black screenwriter hired to direct a fiftymillion-dollar remake of *Birth of a Nation*. We included clips from *Birth of a Nation*. They didn't like that thing at all. How dare I denigrate the father of cinema, D.W. Griffith?" George responded by observing that *The Answer* indicts

Griffith's epic Civil War movie as a "racist" work, which of course it is, and Lee replied, "Yeah. No shit, Sherlock." George further observed that the film must have "offended" people to elicit such negative responses, and Lee answered, "Yeah. I didn't care" (Lee 1987, 33–4).

In sum, Lee was ready from the start to work against the grain of mainstream white cinema. Aware that Los Angeles is allegedly the motion-picture capital of the world, he dutifully gave it a shot, traveling west and taking an internship at Columbia Pictures, which he soon left for several reasons: he didn't know how to drive, he "didn't have the resources [there] to make films," and he simply "wanted to come home" (Lee 1987, 33–4). The idea of laboring on money-driven projects dreamed up by other people must also have grated on his sensibility.

Spike Cuts Heads

His dissatisfaction with NYU notwithstanding, Lee made three movies while studying there, including his 1983 thesis film, *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads*, a seminal work that sets forth three important clues to his future career. For one, the movie cuts heads – not in the barbering sense but in the sense of revealing and excising the inherited ideas, reactionary fantasies, and unexamined prejudices that Americans too often carry around in their minds. For another, it taps into areas of interest that Spike has been investigating and building on ever since: humor, gangster films, and "the incorporation of negritude" into a familiar movie genre (Lee 1987, 34). For the third, *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop* is very much a New York movie, signaling that Lee's ongoing analysis of America's complicated, mercurial character would always be informed by his experiences in that city, the country's most protean and multifarious urban zone.

Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop centers on Zachariah Homer (Monty Ross), who takes over a barbering business after proprietor Joe (Horace Long) dies in a mob-related hit. Zach fares poorly at "head cutting" and his economic future looks grim until he meets the criminal who had set Joe up in the numbers game, a long-established racket whereby people bet on their predictions of the last three digits of the day's total racetrack-gambling figure. Learning that his barbershop will now be a base of operations, Zach has to choose between stooping to their level or standing by his principles.

Spike's decision to make this "semi-gangster" picture was guided partly by the real-world nature of the subject. Numbers-running is a billion-dollar business, he explains in his autobiographical book *Spike Lee: That's My Story and I'm Sticking to It*, and it has "always been a key part of the African-American community" (18). Lee also takes the opportunity to revise the blaxploitation and black-mobster genres, taking them in a more humanistic direction, and to profile some of the character types he encountered in Brooklyn on a regular basis. The movie's attentive portraits of Zach and his social-worker wife, Ruth (Donna Bailey), provided "some of the first sympathetic and detailed glimpses of the borough's African American faces, personalities, and communities," in the words of film scholar Paula J. Massood (125), who also notes Lee's effective use of rap music and break dancing to pinpoint the story's time and place.

Although the story is set squarely in Brooklyn – at the intersection of Flatbush Avenue and Myrtle Avenue, to be precise – *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop* proved anything but parochial in its appeal. It won a student Merit Award from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, shared a prize at a Swiss film festival, and made Spike the first student filmmaker to earn a slot in the highly selective New Directors/ New Films event, presented each year by the Film