

# Reviews

## *Do the Right Thing*

Written and Directed by Spike Lee

Universal Pictures, 1989

Two topics dominated the newspaper headlines in New York City this summer. One was the prospect that Manhattan Borough President David **Dinkins** had a good chance of defeating incumbent Mayor Ed Koch in the Democratic primary in September, thereby virtually guaranteeing the election of the first African American as Mayor of the largest city in the United States. The other was the premiere of Spike Lee's third feature film, *Do the Right Thing*, which is set on a block of the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn on the hottest day of the summer. Many commentators, most of them white, feared that the riot scene at the end of the film would exacerbate the already tense racial atmosphere of the city and inspire blacks to trash white businesses. Instead of hurting Koch's bid for re-election to an unprecedented fourth term, as Lee and many others in the black community hoped, the effect of this racial violence would backfire and cost **Dinkins** the Democratic nomination.

Subsequent events contradicted these predictions. **Dinkins** defeated Koch in the September primary and went on to win over the Republican nominee, the Italian American Rudolph Giuliani, former District Attorney for the city, in the general election in November. The most serious racial incident of the summer occurred in August when a black youth, Yusef **Hawkins**, was killed by a group of whites in the predominantly Italian American section of Bensonhurst in Brooklyn.

On the weekend after **Hawkins'** death, several hundred blacks marched in Bensonhurst past the site of the murder. They were confronted by local residents, many of whom taunted the marchers by holding up watermelons and shouting "Niggers go home!" and "Central Park! Central Park!" (a reference to the rape of a white woman by a gang of blacks in Central Park). The demonstrators shouted back "Howard Beach! Howard Beach!"

The killing of Yusef **Hawkins** was the most recent in a series of incidents that have underscored the deterioration of race relations in New York. One of the most notorious occurred in the Howard Beach section of Queens in December 1986. Three blacks who had stopped to get something to eat in a Pizzeria were harassed by a group of whites brandishing baseball bats. One of the blacks was chased onto a nearby highway where he was run over and

killed. In numerous interviews, Lee has referred to Howard beach as the basis for his film *DO the Right Thing*.

Against the backdrop of a city block in a predominantly black and Latino neighborhood, Lee presents a series of episodes centering around a pizzeria owned by Sal and his two sons, Pino and Vito. Looming over the pizzeria is a huge wall mural of "Brooklyn's Own Mike Tyson" in a fighting pose. The symbolism of this image is elaborated in the opening scenes, which set the tone of the film. To the plaintive tune of what has been called the black national anthem "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (written 1899 by James Weldon and Rosamond Johnson to commemorate Lincoln's birthday), the film opens with credits to Lee's production company, Forty Acres and a Mule, named after the promise by the federal government after the Civil War to provide land for the freed slaves, a promise which was never fulfilled. These two allusions to the African American past are offset by the next sequence, where a young Latino woman, Tina, is seen shadow-boxing to the rhythms of Public Enemy's "Fight the Power". The residents of the community wake up to the rap talk of Mister Senor Love Daddy, owner and disc-jockey of a local radio station set in a storefront window. From this vantage point, Love Daddy can comment of the activities of the neighborhood. Lee then cuts to the street, where Sal and his sons drive down the block in a car. They do not live in the neighborhood.

The film is structured as a series of vignettes describing the life of the street. The plot, such as it is, focuses on the presence of an Italian American business in a black and Latino neighborhood. As the day progresses and the temperature rises, racial tensions are brought into relief, culminating in a riot that destroys Sal's pizzeria. In a scene intended to evoke associations to the Civil Rights demonstrations in Alabama in the early sixties, the police and the fire department disperse the rioters with hoses. By referring to the early days of the Civil Rights movement, Lee suggests that the supposed gains of the movement during the sixties has not brought an end to racism. Lee ends the film with quotes from Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. King's plea for non-violent action and Malcolm's message, "I don't even call it violence when it's self-defense, I call it intelligence" provide the coda for *DO the Right Thing*.

The opening sequences of the film, which form an oral and visual composition of black vernacular, music, and dance, parallel the closing sequences with the quotes from King and Malcolm X and the photograph of the two together. The black national anthem is followed by the aggressive "Fight the Power", and King's non-violent stance is juxtaposed to the militancy of Malcolm X. These sentiments are not presented as an either/or proposition. *DO the Right Thing* does not endorse a particular viewpoint. Instead it

displays diverse elements of an African American tradition in a community that retains a sense of cultural cohesion despite its economic marginality.

Lee is representative of the new African consciousness movement, which stresses black "self-sufficiency" and is reflected in street fashion and music in the black sections of the inner city. Most of the commentary on *Do the Right Thing* has focussed more on Lee's view of race relations and black economic marginalization than on the inner workings of black culture. However, Lee's implicit call for black "Self-sufficiency" is linked to the strength he sees within the black community. In a recent article in the journal *Callaloo*, the young novelist Try Ellis writes of the "New Black Aesthetic" and contrasts it with earlier assertions of black cultural identity. "This New Black Aesthetic Movement ... somehow synthesizes the last two black art revivals, the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. In the Twenties blacks wanted to be considered as good as the dominant culture. In the Sixties we wanted no part of dominant culture at all. Today the NBA wants to dominate it. We feel 'separate but better'." The idea of dominance is perhaps more rhetoric than reality, but nevertheless this sort of militant *Kulturkampf* has traditionally sent shock waves through the white community.

Lee's film reflects Ellis's sentiments. Throughout *Do the Right Thing*, Lee makes overt and oblique references to the positive role of the older generation, the richness of black vernacular, and aspects of black urban experience, expanding his vision of black links to the past. In this sense, *Do the Right Thing* is far from being exclusively an embittered expression of black frustration and rage. The conflict between an Italian American business and a black community is portrayed in cultural terms. As representatives of the older generation, Da Mayor and Mother Sister (played by Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, veterans of black stage and film) provide a sense of the past and keep a watchful eye on the activities of the community. The three corner men offer running commentary on street life by "playing the dozens" (what Lawrence Levine in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* calls "verbal duelling"). The black youth, Mookie (played by Lee) named after Mookie Wilson of the Mets, Buggin' Out, and Radio Raheem typify hip hop culture with their loose-fitting "B-style" sports T-shirts, white Air Jordan sneakers, Africa medallions, and rap talk. At one point in the film, Love Daddy declaims a litany of black music from the soul of Stevie Wonder to the funk of Prince, the jazz of Wynton Marsalis to the retronuevo sound of Anita Baker. Nelson George, who coined the term retronuevo, defines it (in *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* from 1988) as "an embrace of the past to crate passionate, fresh expressions and institutions."

*Do the Right Thing* is retronuevo on the screen. By presenting a panorama of the distant past, Lee's vision extends beyond that of social commentary on the race issue. Despite its negative social features and economic

impoverishment, the black urban community has maintained a strong culture that has enabled it to survive generations of racial discrimination. In a society that, more than twenty years after the Civil Rights movement, still remains racially and culturally divided, Lee's film is a personal statement combining a response to immediate social issues with a tribute to the resilience of African American culture.

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John Svendsen og Leif Vangdrup. *USA: Samfund og ressourcer i politisk perspektiv*. København: Munksgaard, 1989. 216 pp. illustrated, incl. index and statistical appendices.

With the cover depicting Jasper John's "Map" (1961), with the title alluding to Dos Passos—and with their dedication of the book to Frank Zappa—the authors make it clear that they have a large claim in mind. Although the book is written as an introductory textbook in American history and geography, *USA* contains, nonetheless, a virtual reinterpretation of the way to perceive contemporary America, and, by implication, a significant critique of a viewpoint often associated with American Studies.

One of the persistent themes of American Studies—a theme which has repeatedly inspired official speech writing—states that in America nature redeems culture. American geography served to renew the political system. From Turner's frontier to Silicon Valley, the abundance of nature exploited by human ingenuity made possible a society where each could claim his own, including the right to vote. This way of perceiving the US ultimately depends upon John Locke, the father of liberalism, who taught the Founding Fathers of the Constitution to understand political society as the result of a social contract, the terms of which were conceived in the liberty of a "natural state" characterized by plenty. Countless political addresses, countless books, and innumerable movies have replayed this basic theme of American civilization. "America was the only country which began in perfection and aspired only to progress," as the historian Richard Hofstadter once put it. It seems to follow that the ideal citizen is born with a geographical mission: to get going and to

make himself available for 'free land'/new jobs/new opportunities. This set of assumptions is taken for granted by many standard textbooks teaching one to expect that historical accounts of the United States be prefaced by a geographical presentation which cannot but inculcate a sense of the exuberant blessings bestowed on the continent by holy nature itself.

By reversing this pattern—by proceeding from a comprehensive historical account to a number of chapters that provide detailed information about the salient environmental issues in the US—USA undermines the basic American myth, which has been remarkable for its ability to perpetuate the hope of a new (re)invention of America. It effectively dispels any notions of 'a fast fix.' USA is not a theoretical work, but an exposition of the basic assumption that American geography is constituted by a specific distribution of economic and political power, and thus, that the 'natural' environment is deeply politicized and can only be fully comprehended by political categories.

The "historical section" is concluded with a concise summary of the problems that are recognized by most commentators: the debt issue, the loss of economic, military, and political power abroad, and the domestic social problems that have been further aggravated during the Reagan administration. It is illustrated by a picture of Ronald Reagan addressing the world through the Voice of America. With Reagan's melodious voice still in the ears, the reader is next confronted with the angry roar from Mount St. Helens, 1980, as an introduction to examples of the interaction between natural resources and interest politics. Thus, the journey through historical consciousness is followed by an exploration of the American political subconsciousness—a realm largely banished from the official image of the nation.

Past inequities were not undone by the magic of the Civil War, the Progressive Reform movement, the New Deal or the Great Society, but are shown with an amazing array of statistics to have been carried forward—and, in fact to accumulate with the passage of time. The present ecological state of the Union is the consequence of a politics that go back as far as the founding of the Republic. Contemporary America is faced with the prospect of scarcity embracing even the basic collective conditions for life. Adequate supplies of air, energy, and water can no longer be taken for granted, but appear now as commodities that are rapidly becoming objects of intense conflict. Thus, a narrative structure unifies the tale of USA. The past is carried into the future—not in a rhetoric of gloom—but accompanied by cool, sobering facts, mostly based on official records. Despondency is a luxury that the authors cannot afford in view of the character of the situation.

Although the historical and the geographical sections form an integrated whole, the text is actually divided into separate chapters that accommodate the reader's expectation about the integrity of each discipline. USA is one of the few works that attempts to treat American regional diversity in some depth. It

is, in addition, highly innovative in terms of pedagogy. Its red skein of official statistics is spun with elegance. Its use of "boxes" for singling out special topics, such as "the political system," "nativism and racial unrest," "oil and the American empire," and "supply side economics and monetarism," make it useful as a handbook for quick and precise reference. Ideological analysis is elaborated in numerous photographs that are presented for a purpose of reflection and analysis rather than as simple illustrations.

Although *USA* is presented as a textbook in American history and geography at the level of *gymnasium* teaching, its scope and concerns are addressed to any serious observer of the United States. A translated version would be highly valuable for university teaching in the Nordic countries and elsewhere.

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