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Introduction

THE FILMS OF SHELTON J. LEE

On March 27, 1957, in Atlanta, Georgia, Shelton J. Lee (A.K.A. Spike Lee) was born to Jacquelyn, a schoolteacher, and Bill, a jazz composer-musician. During Lee's infancy, his family moved to New York City and resided in the integrated Brooklyn neighborhoods of Crown Heights, Cobble Hill, and Fort Greene, where he attended P.S. 294, Rothschild Junior High. In a few of his feature films, Lee uses his intimate knowledge of these racially integrated Brooklyn neighborhoods to dramatize the sometimes violent encounters that occur between African-Americans and their nonblack New York City neighbors.

Like many middle-class African-American children who grew up in the 1960s, Spike Lee was raised on popular culture that included movies featuring James Bond and the Beatles. Lee reminisces, "I can remember my mother, Jacquelyn, taking me to see James Bond movies. She liked them. I used to like old 007 myself. I remember seeing *Help!* with the Beatles and *A Hard Day's Night*."[1] Lee and his siblings had many opportunities to learn to appreciate other art forms as well. His mother shared her interest in the performing and visual arts with her children. Their frequent family outings to films and plays would later influence the children's career choices. Lee states:

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> My mother was always taking me places to see the performing arts. I was grounded in the arts. I can remember so clearly how she took me to the Radio City Music Hall . . . to see *Bye Bye Birdie.* I also remember her taking me to Broadway to see *The King and I* with Yul Brynner when I was four or five years old. . . . All this exposure started my interest in the visual arts. My siblings and I were exposed to the arts, all of 'em. This happened as soon as we could walk. I believe exposure makes all the difference in the long run.[2]

Spike Lee's familial loyalty helped launch the artistic careers of his sister, Joie, and his two brothers, Cinque and David. Lee has also helped publicize the musical talents of his father, Bill Lee. He gave his siblings and father opportunities to work on major studio productions. Consequently, David was given a rare opportunity to join the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians.[3] Lee employed several members of his family when he shot his first feature, *She's Gotta Have It* (Island Pictures, 1986). He gave Joie an acting credit, Cinque a production assistant credit, and David a still cinematographer credit; Bill Lee wrote the original music score. In Lee's second feature, *School Daze* (Columbia, 1988), Joie had a more prominent acting role, Cinque was an apprentice editor, and David was a still cinematographer. Spike employed Bill Lee to write the original score for his New York University student films, *Sarah* (1981) and *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads* (1982);[4] Bill also scored the music for *School Daze* and the Universal Pictures *Do the Right Thing* (1989),[5] *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), and *Jungle Fever* (1991).

From 1975 to 1979, Lee attended his father's alma mater, Morehouse College, a historic black college in Atlanta whose alumni include Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Lee graduated from Morehouse with a bachelor of arts degree in mass communications. The following summer, he interned with Columbia Studios and entered New York University's Film School in the fall. While studying at NYU, he cultivated a working friendship with

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a fellow film student, cinematographer Ernest Dickerson. In recalling his NYU years with Dickerson, Lee says:

> Ernest and I were in the same class. We came in together. He was from Howard. I was from Morehouse.... We were the only blacks at NYU. There were two sections the first year and we were in different sections. The second year he shot my film *Sarah*.
>
> In my senior year he shot *Joe's*.[6]

In 1981, with Dickerson behind the camera, Lee made his master of fine arts thesis film, *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads*. *Joe's* won the Best Student Film Award from the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences. It was the first student film ever shown at Lincoln Center's "New Directors, New Films" series. The Academy Award and Lincoln Center screening brought Lee's talent to the attention of film executives, critics, and the general public. Lee established his production company, Forty Acres and a Mule Filmworks, and employed Ernest Dickerson as the cinematographer for most of the features produced by the company.

Lee's reputation grew with the favorable reception of his first feature-length film, *She's Gotta Have It,* at the 1986 San Francisco Film Festival. Luckily, Island Pictures saw the film and contracted to distribute it. Island Pictures took it to the Cannes Film Festival, where it received the 1986 Prix de Jeunesse–Best New Director. The Spike Lee and Ernest Dickerson filmmaking team brought continued artistic success to films made by Forty Acres and a Mule Filmworks.

In 1988, Lee memorialized his Morehouse College experiences in *School Daze*. This film presents an interesting image of black fraternity and sorority life; some scenes portray fraternity and sorority rivalry that explodes into musical numbers. The confrontations that occur between radical students and conservative college administrators resemble what happens between adventurous adolescents and their anxious parents. This particular

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film and other Forty Acres and a Mule Filmworks presentations exhibit a distinct appreciation of family-like loyalty. First and foremost, Lee is interested in his biological family, and dutifully includes them in the making of his films. In addition, his films portray a brotherly attachment to neighborhood types who form an extended black family.

THE EXTENDED FAMILY AS BLACK COMMUNITY

She's Gotta Have It, DRT, Mo' Better Blues, and *Crooklyn* (Universal, 1994) feature characters whose democratic ambitions are challenged by harsh social realities. In *She's Gotta Have It,* a young black woman named Nola wants to maintain a steady sexual relationship with three different men. In *DRT,* Buggin' Out, a politicized black teenager, demands that an Italian-American pizzeria owner place photographs of black personalities alongside the images of Italian-American celebrities that adorn the pizzeria's wall. Buggin' Out argues that since blacks patronize the pizzeria, images of black celebrities should be included on the wall. These two films explore philosophical issues that impinge on the economic. Nola and Buggin' Out disagree with generally accepted social conventions – monogamy and private property rights. Economic issues are dealt with more directly in the other two films, in which individuals are pawns in the marketing strategies of the entertainment industry.

In *Mo' Better Blues,* Bleek, a jazz musician-composer, never controls the financial aspects of his artistic labors. In *Crooklyn,* Woody Carmichael, the father of five children and an unemployed jazz musician-composer, refuses to compose and perform mainstream jazz music. Woody never takes a job to help Carolyn, his schoolteacher wife, feed their five children. *Crooklyn* and *Mo' Better Blues* pay tribute to the inventive art of black jazz musicians while dismissing their ability to reap monetary rewards from their work. Both films criticize the American entertainment industry, which, according to the films, selectively

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FIGURE 1
Buggin' Out (Giancarlo Esposito) incites a rebellion against Sal's Famous Pizzeria. (From the editor's collection.)

markets jazz by catering to the taste of the largest segment of the *paying* public. Nonetheless, Woody is partially at fault for his stubborn refusal to find work outside of the industry that destroys him and his family.

The four films portray Nola, Buggin' Out, Bleek, and Woody as pawns of either social conventions or the entertainment industry. Socioeconomic forces flatten dreams and diminish the hopes of each of the four characters, who threaten the status quo.

The success of Nola's polygamous heterosexual relationships with three black men would prevent a conventional marriage to one man and submission to his paternal authority. The "maintenance men of family values" want to know which of these men will marry Nola. Lee subtly indicts these merchants of nine-

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teenth-century morality in an age of single parenthood, AIDS, and planned parenthood. *She's Gotta Have It* attempts to show how monogamy can oppress a woman like Nola. *DRT* dramatizes a situation in which a pizzeria owner's racial insensitivity leads to the death of a young black man. Unlike the events in *DRT,* those portrayed in *Mo' Better Blues* and *Crooklyn* do not lead to the death of their male characters. *Crooklyn,* however, ends with the death of Carolyn, the hardworking mother of five. The film does not criticize nineteenth-century sexual conventions that oppress libertine women like Nola; it does, however, criticize a father's capricious actions and show how his frivolity contributes to his wife's untimely death. In addition, the film shows Troy, a ten-year-old girl, performing her deceased mother's household duties because her father has not changed his ways.

Both *Mo' Better Blues* and *Crooklyn,* to various degrees, depict

FIGURE 2

Troy Carmichael (Zelda Harris), the ten-year-old daughter of Carolyn Carmichael (Alfre Woodard), learns responsibility from her mother in *Crooklyn.* (From the editor's collection.)

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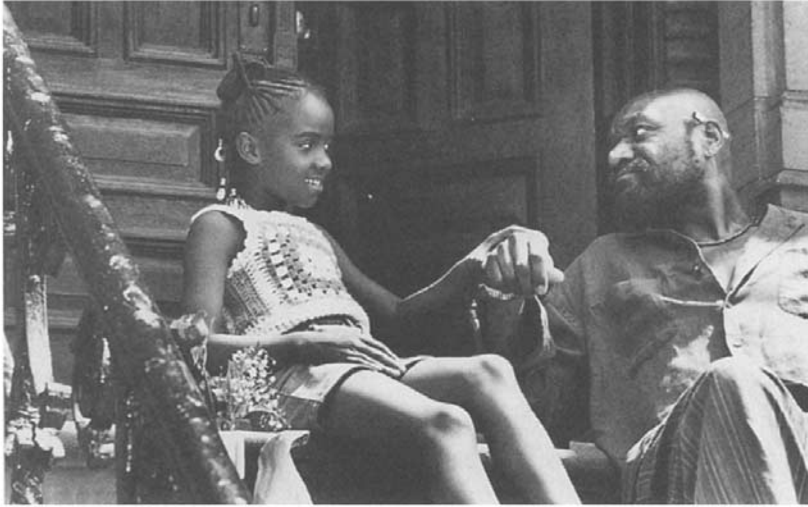

FIGURE 3
Troy learns poetry from her father, Woody Carmichael (Delroy Lindo), in *Crooklyn*. (From the editor's collection.)

the entertainment industry's exploitation of black jazz musicians and composers, who, out of economic necessity, are forced either to perform and compose music for the largest listening public or to live unproductive lives. Unlike Lee's subtle criticism of sexism in *She's Gotta Have It*, the films *DRT*, *Mo' Better Blues*, and *Crooklyn* present chilling images of black oppression by brutal police and an exploitive entertainment industry. Spike Lee creates populist hero(ine)s and films them within a black culturalist philosophical frame.[7]

Lee's films tend to honor a defeated African-American as populist hero(ine). In American film, this sort of character was prominent in such Frank Capra social comedies as *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (Columbia, 1936) and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (Columbia, 1939). In these two Depression era films, the Anglo-American hero is oblivious to the machinations of big business and the existence of political corruption; the hero puts up a good fight but never changes the system. In like manner, Lee's

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films show the unceasing hope yet waning possibilities of a spirited African-American hero(ine) whose success requires a constant fight against systemic racism and, in Nola's case, sexism. Lee's protagonists find themselves caught in choke holds that suffocate opportunities, destroy democratic dreams, and pull hero and heroine into a self-destructive bitterness. These individuals are far from the mountaintop dreamt by Dr. Martin Luther King. Lee is trying to show his multiracial audience that many African-Americans are increasingly rejecting Dr. King's nonviolent tactics as a means to achieve social and economic equality in the United States.

These films in general, and *DRT* in particular, dramatize a static African-American geographical location in which neighborhood personalities infuse the film with a 1960s version of the black community. In *DRT* these figures include a friendly alcoholic (Ossie Davis as Da Mayor), a wise black matron (Ruby Dee as Mother Sister), nonblack shopkeepers (Danny Aiello, as Sal, and the Korean grocer), and policemen. If there is drug use, it consists in the consumption of alcohol, the inhaling of glue, and the smoking of marijuana. These *unthreatening* images occur in some of Lee's films (with the exception of contemporary images of crack cocaine use in *Jungle Fever* and *Clockers*).

A SYNOPSIS OF *DRT*

Do the Right Thing presents the destructive results of a meltdown, on the hottest day of the year, of interracial and interethnic civility between people who share one block in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant. Sal, the Italian-American owner of Sal's Famous Pizzeria, has been selling pizza in this Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood for twenty years. He employs his two sons, Pino (John Turturro) and Vito (Richard Edson), and the African-American pizza delivery man, Mookie (Spike Lee). Sal and his sons do not live in this predominantly black neighborhood. Mookie, on the other hand, lives in the neighborhood and most of its African-American and Puerto Ri-

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can residents respect him. Mookie is the mediating character who tries to ease the racial animosity between Sal and two black teenagers, Buggin' Out and Radio Raheem.

Buggin' Out (Giancarlo Esposito) is a pseudo–black nationalist who sports an African pendant around his neck but still wears stylish white, unlaced Air Jordan basketball shoes. His fashionable urban dress defuses his political statements: he is so full of himself and his hip-hop look that his politics appear comical.

For instance, Buggin' Out enters Sal's to buy a slice of pizza and, as he begins to eat, becomes increasingly bothered by the photographs of Italian-American personalities who decorate the "Wall of Fame" in Sal's pizzeria. He asks Sal why he doesn't include some photographs of African-American personalities, since Blacks constitute a large part of Sal's clientele. Sal callously replies, "You want brothers up on the Wall of Fame, you open up your own business, then you can do what you wanna do. My pizzeria, Italian Americans up on the wall."[8] Buggin' Out will not accept Sal's slight. He thoughtfully responds, "Sal, that might be fine, you own this, but rarely do I see any Italian Americans eating in here. All I've ever seen is Black folks. So since we spend much money here, we do have some say."[9] Sal and Buggin Out's verbal altercation develops into Buggin' Out's efforts to organize a boycott of Sal's Famous Pizzeria.

In the next scene featuring Buggin' Out, Clifton (John Savage), a white yuppie who owns a brownstone on the block, accidentally bumps into Buggin' Out and steps on his Air Jordans, which elicits a moderately heated exchange. Buggin' Out's bombastic performance is lost on Clifton, who coolly proceeds into his flat.

Buggin' Out's physical threats are windy and his threatened boycott never materializes because the neighborhood residents see through his sham. Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn), however, is quite a different character: after Sal has two violent encounters with him, the black communities coalesce in a spontaneous assault on Sal's Famous Pizzeria.

Radio Raheem is a respected and feared teenager who carries a

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large portable radio blasting rap music. In one scene he intimidates Puerto Rican youths sitting on a stoop listening to salsa. In another, he verbally assaults a Korean shopkeeper, who nervously searches for the correct batteries for Radio's radio. Now, with his radio blasting "Fight the Power," Raheem enters Sal's Famous Pizzeria. Unlike the others, Sal isn't flustered by Radio Raheem's muscular build, belligerent demands, and wailing radio, and he sternly tells Radio to turn the music off. Radio grudgingly complies and receives a slice of pizza. On another occasion, however, Sal and Radio Raheem have a similar verbal exchange that turns into a physical wrestling match. The New York City police arrive and one officer places a choke hold on Raheem, who suffocates. The black community, angered by Raheem's senseless death, directs its rage at Sal's pizzeria. Racism as personified by both Radio Raheem's death and Sal's racial insensitivity becomes the match which ignites the torch that destroys the pizzeria.

DRT vividly portrays how a twenty-four-hour period can erupt into a seething interracial and interethnic display of mistrust that will further explode into civil disobedience and, in the "real world," into urban uprisings that leave many dead or homeless.

THE IMPORTANCE OF *DRT*

DRT received an Academy Award nomination for best original screenplay and the Best Director and Best Picture Awards from the Los Angeles Film Critics Association. The film is Lee's first serious dramatization of New York's current racial problems. It is, as the essays in this volume argue, the U.S. film industry's most serious treatment of contemporary forms of racism, which Lee subsequently developed in *Jungle Fever*. In *Jungle Fever,* Lee continues his treatment of New York's racial problems and dramatizes the love–hate relationship he and other black New Yorkers have with their Italian-American neighbors. Lee reminds his audience, initially in *DRT* and then in *Jungle Fever,* that people

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