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Each CAMBRIDGE FILM HANDBOOK contains essays by leading film scholars and critics that focus on a single film from a variety of theoretical, critical, and contextual perspectives. This "prism" approach is designed to give students and general readers valuable background and insight into the cinematic, artistic, cultural, and sociopolitical importance of selected films. It is also intended to help readers grasp the nature of critical and theoretical discourse on cinema as an art form, a visual medium, and a cultural product. Filmographies and select bibliographies are included to aid readers in their own exploration of the film under consideration.

Spike Lee's
Do the Right Thing

Edited by
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2 The Cinema of Spike Lee

IMAGES OF A MOSAIC CITY

Before the release of *Malcolm X* had redirected critical attention at Spike Lee, the May 1992 Los Angeles uprising sharpened the relevance of Lee’s political message. Within the corpus of Lee’s five films, *Do the Right Thing* seemed the most inclined to reveal the political underpinnings of Lee’s cinema, which had been so far inherently subversive. In retrospect, Los Angeles somehow vindicated Spike Lee, whose deliberate, aesthetically pleasing vision had been derided as a theatricalization rather than a “real” depiction of black sociopolitics. Critics pitted Lee’s black aesthetic against the sociological concerns of another black movie maker, John Singleton, who in *Boyz N the Hood* shows the dissolution of the ghetto, yet fails to dramatize the important issue that is central to DTR – the struggles for power within the city. However, any serious analysis of DTR requires a discussion of the film’s relationship to the filmmaker, Lee.

It is widely acknowledged that Lee courts and then provokes the white establishment with an irritating insolence that reflects on the reception of his cinema. Lee has become a sought-after spokesman for the African-American community, and his film journals discuss his cinematic politics of black identity. He, however, is quick to deny a “racialized” legitimacy. The general pop-
essay analyzes Lee's cinematic aesthetic by discussing the formation of territorial roots.

**THE TERRITORIAL INSCRIPTION OF SPIKE LEE'S FILMS**

With the exception of the southern setting of *School Daze* and some Harlem scenes in *Mo' Better Blues* and *Jungle Fever*, Brooklyn has been Spike Lee's favorite shooting location. Lee himself never fails to emphasize his Brooklyn roots. Brooklyn is where he grew up and still lives, although he resides with other upwardly mobile young artists and professionals in gentrified neighborhoods in the Fort Greene section near Brooklyn Heights. This is also the neighborhood where his film production company, Forty Acres and a Mule, and his retail store, Spike Lee Joint, are located.

Lee's use of Brooklyn is not accidental. The most densely populated of New York City's five boroughs (2.2 million inhabitants out of a total New York City population of more than 7 million), Brooklyn is the home of more than half of New York City's African-American population. Today, Brooklyn, not Harlem, qualifies as a black metropolis. Brooklyn best illustrates what Marcel Roncayolo, a French geographer, calls the palimpsest dimension of the city in its superimposition of past remains and traces of the present. Its gentrified sections are populated predominantly by affluent whites. There are interracial neighborhoods where new immigrants have joined the ranks of African-Americans and Hispanics; there are also Jewish and Italian enclaves and older white working-class neighborhoods that are undergoing racial and economic transitions. Yet, from this astounding patchwork, which has earned New York the designation "the mosaic city," Spike Lee retains a highly selective vision of Brooklyn, an image stilled in time and space. In *DRT*, he films a story about one day in the life of a block in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. And starting from a tangible reality (the film was actually shot on Stuyvesant Avenue between

FIGURE 5
The four faces of Mookie (Spike Lee): Upper left: Agent for Nike athletic gear. Upper right: The bedroom-eyes lover of Tina (Rosie Perez). Lower left: Pizza delivery man. Lower right: Filmmaker of *Do the Right Thing*. (From the editor's collection.)

ularity and commercial success of Lee's films among both black and nonblack audiences make him a mediator between the African-American community and the white establishment. It permits him to have his love-hate relationship with the American film industry. One can possibly transcend Lee's ambiguity by tracing how his films construct a racialized territory. This
Quincy Street and Lexington Avenue), Spike Lee performs a series of manipulations that artfully transform a very real setting into a theatrical stage. On this stage, his didactic vision projects itself onto the silver screen. By choosing to situate his film in "Bed-Stuy," Lee brings a new slant to filmed and televised images of Brooklyn. He chooses an area of Brooklyn that symbolizes the black ghetto with its substandard housing and record-high number of welfare recipients. Yet Lee's black ghetto is not devastated by poverty, unemployment, and drug abuse. If Lee's stylized Bed-Stuy is so different from the Los Angeles ghetto depicted by filmmaker John Singleton, it is because Lee's aesthetic concerns deliberately overshadow the depth and intensity of racial and economic exclusion.

Public Enemy, Lee's "favorite politically conscious rappers," provides lyrics to underline the film's politics of resistance - "Fight the Powers That Be." Visually, DRT is painted in "Afrocentric bright" colors. At Lee's shoot, an inner-city neighborhood, there was an absence of drug use and street gangs thanks to the work of the Fruit of Islam, which kept local hoodlums and drug dealers at a safe distance from the shooting location. The images of Blacks and Latinos are demographically skewed in DRT since native-born African-Americans and Puerto Ricans are decreasing in relative number compared with New York's general black and Latino population. Currently, Puerto Ricans make up less than half the New York Latino population, and the overall black population includes 25 percent foreign-born Blacks. In spite of these demographic shifts, Lee depicts a monolithic black community. DRT includes young Puerto Ricans, but Bed-Stuy, in the heart of the "dark" ghetto, is even more atypical of Brooklyn in that Whites make up only about 2 percent of its population. Thus, the African-American population dominates (87.3 percent), and though Puerto Ricans are visible, they remain a definite minority (8.3 percent), while Asians (at 0.8 percent) and other recent immigrants (1.5 percent) have an even smaller presence.

The interethnic chessboard of DRT, therefore, offers a warped vision of the actual social scene in the 1990s. Other than the single character of the Korean grocer, the new immigrants are little more than extras. Managing his own business and making a good living, the grocer acts as a foil to his African-American patrons stuck at the bottom rungs of the social ladder. Spike Lee is deliberately provocative when he has three black men voice resentment against the Korean: Lee thereby suggests that these men clearly lack enterprise. He almost echoes the criticism that neoconservatives have directed against Blacks who are dependent on federal entitlements and welfare programs. Yet it is significant that Lee does not recirculate stereotypes such as the unemployed, murderous, drug-dealing black youth. Rather, he portrays the three black men as likable, happy-go-lucky characters who are simply shorter on deeds than words. His three "corner men" act as a chorus that offers ongoing commentary on the neighborhood.

In contrast to these working-class characters is one middle-class Euro-American. Clifton, the yuppy owner of a brownstone, is a quite improbable figure in Bed-Stuy. He is presented as a third-generation white ethnic born in Brooklyn and raised in the suburbs who has decided to return to the city. The scene in which he carries his bike up his stoop and accidentally steps on Buggin' Out's new sneakers and soils them is an inside joke for those familiar with the Michael Jordan television commercial. In this black community, being "dressed to kill" means wearing popular sneakers and other accessories and being ready to kill anyone who disrespects them. The verbal altercation between Clifton and Buggin' Out's friends does not degenerate into violence, somewhat unconvincingly, but this encounter is one of several interracial altercations with nonblacks that increase racial tensions up to the murder of Radio Raheem and the destruction of Sal's pizzeria.

Sal's pizzeria is a distinct remnant of the past. Sal and his sons do not live in the neighborhood where the pizzeria is located.
but in Bensonhurst. In fact, in the actual Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn in which the film is shot, an Italian-run business would be a curiosity.

Last, the block lives under the scrutiny of a patrol of white policemen who don’t even try to conceal their deep contempt when they coolly observe the three street-corner men sitting idly under their beach umbrella, talking their heads off day in, day out. The tension generated by the oversight of the neighborhood by these insensitive, potentially racist white cops is exaggerated to the point of caricature. Police forces, though still a white bastion, have been significantly integrated in the past twenty years, so that, especially in the ghetto, a patrol today is very unlikely to consist of Whites only.

Surreptitiously filtered through Spike Lee’s didactic lenses, the confrontation between African-Americans and a white society ethnicized into Italians, Jews, and Irish is magnified, although it reflects the context of the late 1960s much more accurately than the present situation, in which Blacks are increasingly confronted in their neighborhoods by other American ethnic minorities as well as newly arrived immigrants. But far from being a vision inadvertently inherited from a vanished past, this obsessive, permanent confrontation between Blacks and Whites best reflects one aspect of New York City life: the political arena, where the black community struggles to assert itself against a white political establishment, still in a position to dominate the decision-making process in spite of the fact that New York City has become a majority of minorities.

THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF DO THE RIGHT THING: THE (RE)CONQUEST OF POWER

Spike Lee’s film is replete with references to a series of racial incidents that polarized New York and sharpened interethnic tensions. The film is dedicated to the families of victims of police brutality: Eleanor Bumpurs, an old black woman who was evicted from her apartment; Michael Stewart, strangled like Radio Raheem by a choke hold; Arthur Miller, a black entrepreneur who was the victim of mistaken identities, unjustly arrested and beaten up, and, in 1978, died as a result of the beating. Arthur Miller’s death prompted Reverend Herbert Daughtry, a neighborhood preacher, to found the Black United Front, which is still active in New York City politics. The film also makes explicit references to incidents of interethnic violence, such as the killing of Michael Griffith, who, as he was leaving a pizzeria in the predominantly white Howard Beach section of Queens, was fatally beaten by Italian-American youths armed with baseball bats. Michael Griffith’s death mobilized the African-American community. Reverend Daughtry and other community activists staged a day of protest, called a “Day of Rage,” which was organized around a march across the Brooklyn Bridge. By his own
account, this incident triggered Spike Lee’s idea for *DRT* and provided him with a basic iconography, although he transposed the scene from Queens to Brooklyn. And in the climatic scene when Sal’s pizzeria is looted, the black youths wreck the place as they shout “Howard Beach.” The film, therefore, provides two perspectives: the references to racial incidents and their direct link to former New York mayor Ed Koch’s divisive ethnic politics. The film should be read against the background of the 1989 New York mayoral campaign, which resulted in the election of David Dinkins and the rejection of Mayor Ed Koch, a three-term incumbent, who had become extremely unpopular within the black community. To understand the historical importance of Lee’s film, one must first understand the neoconservative politics of the Koch administration, which laid the foundation for the reign of interethnic hatred and murders that Lee suggestively portrays in *DRT*.

In 1977, the election of Ed Koch signaled the renewal of the electorate’s concern for the white middle class. The Koch 1977 campaign created a pro-growth coalition with New York business elites so Koch could implement a policy of fiscal retrenchment that would eliminate many of New York’s liberal social programs. Koch attacked his predecessor, John Lindsay, for his excessive clientelist policies and held them responsible for the fiscal crisis that left New York on the verge of bankruptcy in 1975. New York City’s predicament revealed to a stunned nation the economic crisis that would later be shared by other major U.S. cities. Former mayor John Lindsay had indeed confronted social unrest as well as the pent-up demands of the large municipal work force that New York, like all other major municipal governments, had to develop to meet the needs of a large, increasingly heterogeneous population. As the suburbs prospered at the expense of major urban centers, the social and economic disparities between cities and their suburbs widened, and the cities, by the 1970s, became fiscally vulnerable. The forces that prompted middle-class workers to move outside city limits also kept a large number of the poor in the inner cities. A disproportionate number of minority households became socially isolated and increasingly dependent on public welfare programs. Consequently, there was an increased demand for municipal services, which fueled the urban fiscal crisis after the city tax base had eroded.

By the 1970s, New York was not only fiscally vulnerable; its inhabitants had become even more subject to the whims of politicians and business leaders seeking fiscally responsible programs. To reestablish and stabilize New York City’s fiscal health, Mayor Koch adopted a rhetoric of boosterism and pushed for downtown redevelopment strategies that focused on tourism (for example, the “I Love New York” campaign), conventions, downtown retailing, and the construction of midtown office buildings and luxury apartments. The assumption was that these redevelopment incentives, fueled by all kinds of tax exemptions, would attract private investors to Manhattan and create a good business climate for pulling the city out of its economic doldrums. Mayor Koch’s plan did, in fact, bring about an economic turnaround; unfortunately, it affected only the corporate business world, failing to foster community-wide prosperity. The upper middle and upper classes prospered from Manhattan’s economic restructuring, but impoverished Blacks and Hispanics as well as the displaced manufacturing workers were increasingly locked out of the economic mainstream. It was this ethnically mixed group of New Yorkers who faced shrinking economic opportunities and increasing neighborhood distress.

Mayor Koch’s “blame the victim” attitude was demoralizing in the context of growing social inequalities between highly skilled professionals and the increasingly unskilled workers who were cut out when New York received its economic face lift. Despite these blatant inequities, Koch’s demagogy made him quite popular among white conservative working-class Catholics and Jews in the outer boroughs. African-Americans, whose political coming-of-age under former mayor John Lindsay’s administration had not yet translated into an institutionalized, long-term presence, found themselves marginalized.
Repeated failures in 1981 and 1985 to win back the mayoralty were evidence of the black community's political weakness. Plagued by inner strife, it was unable to reach out to Latinos and build a progressive coalition. After these electoral defeats, the time was ripe in 1989 to "do the right thing," a formidable rallying cry that reverberated throughout the summer and was adopted by the New York hospital workers' Local 1199 as their motto. In September, the union organized a huge protest meeting at Riverside Church, which attracted many local and national black politicians such as David Dinkins and Jesse Jackson. By the time DRT was released in 1989, the New York City mayoral campaign had already turned ugly, as reflected in the film's final intertitle, "The election is near!" This exclamatory statement is Spike Lee's implicit encouragement to his audience to vote for David Dinkins.

Today, the black Brooklyn community is at the forefront of a new type of activism that has resulted from alliances between progressive politicians working with religious leaders, local activists, and trade unionists. These people have formed a political community outside the traditional scope of elected black politicians who are beholden to the Democratic Party. Reverend Herbert Daughtry, a symbolic and real-life figure who marries Bleek and Indigo at the end of Lee's Mo' Better Blues, is the very embodiment of black Brooklyn's political activism as it attempts to reconcile the two schools of black political nationalism - cultural and radical. This activism has emerged from the debates of the late 1960s to transcend its philosophical divisions and seek a common strategy for black political empowerment and black community control over its socioeconomic life.

Such a strategy will nonetheless always be self-defeating unless previously untapped electoral resources, a pool of potential new voters, is politically mobilized within the black community, and this cannot be achieved without a socialization process as well. DRT shows the economic exclusion of African-Americans but shuns any portrayal of the social pathologies that such economic deprivations engender. Paradoxically, the film has become a trademark of life in the ghetto. I contend that in DRT there is a refusal to depict realistically deviant behavioral patterns, and this is Lee's penultimate political mistake. His message should express the need to transcend all forms of gratuitous, self-destructive violence. The looting of Sal's pizzeria brings about the disappearance of the only space in which neighborhood youths meet in a convivial way - a place where they might create multiethnic alliances for higher socioeconomic stakes and thereby become serious social activists.

This process raises the larger issue of the symbolic (de)construction of space. Under the pretense of an aesthetic vision, Spike Lee gives us a re-presentation of a black ghetto that is also a black neighborhood (I am here referring to the traditional sense of "neighborhood" - a place complete with a sense of time and space), one that has not yet deteriorated into what the French anthropologist Marc Auge calls a non-lieu, that is, a non-existent place, a sort of wasteland. As the "utter negation of utopia," Auge claims that a "non-lieu . . . exists but fails to shelter any organic society." Spike Lee is fully aware that depicting the ghetto as a regular neighborhood, with its families, social life, and characters, as it no longer exists, is in fact more disturbing to mainstream audiences than adopting the sort of realistic approach John Singleton used in Boyz N the Hood.

In a country where the antiurban bias is so strong that most people, including politicians, seem resigned to having a nation of cities in crisis, cities are no longer viewed as important for the health of the nation. Indifference to the plight of the inner cities is even greater. The fact, clearly demonstrated by all the scholarly literature, that the socially polarized and divided cities of the global society have been shaped primarily by market forces and reinforced by federal policies remains largely ignored by the general public. Throughout the Reagan–Bush years, middle-class Americans were encouraged to secede from the losers. Spike Lee reminds them that the social costs of economic restructuring are very real and disproportionately borne by racial minorities. Something must be done about it. Economist Richard
Knight believes that a "civic awareness" has to emerge. Surely, it is an uphill battle for those who fight against indifference to the plight of the urban centers. Knight says that "cities do not have an urban vision nor think of themselves as having the power to shape their own destinies." Yet he quickly counters such pessimism: "Divided cities are not inevitable, they are created by default. Cities have a choice: they can allow market forces and technology to dictate development and become divided cities or they can shape development through the civic process and secure a future in the global society."

Obviously, this comprehensive approach to cities is only dawning because, as Peter Salins explains, it implies a debunking of "the Faustian metropolitan bargain" that made segregation economically and socially functional for metropolitan businesses and residents. He writes, "The cities agreed to serve increasingly as the poorhouses of the metropolitan community, as long as the suburbanites—with Washington and the state capitals acting as brokers and intermediaries—underwrite the extra costs this role imposes." The belief that "cities are an optional feature of the US economic landscape," and that in the new posturban America most people can find not only their homes but their livelihoods in the suburbs, is even a more formidable obstacle than years of unfair and shortsighted policies. The prejudice against cities is so deeply rooted in mainstream public opinion that "their economic obsolescence is for many Americans something to cheer rather than to lament." The cosmopolitan nature of the modern metropolis was, from the first, alien to the two dominant representations of the American ideal, identified by Thomas Bender as the communitarian myth of the U.S. town and the agrarian myth of the U.S. landscape. Both myths emphasized sameness and homogeneity and reflected weariness with the immorality and deviance associated with urban life. Jefferson had articulated most forcefully this deep distrust of cities, which he claimed to be "sores upon the body politic. The escape to suburbia, a "refuge between the decadent city and the howling wilderness," can thus be traced to the

beginning of the nineteenth century, when the largest cities underwent a dramatic spatial change and promoted "a new pattern of suburban affluence and center of despair." Initially, the impetus to retreat to the suburbs was prompted by the desire to find a refuge from the untidy, chaotic, immigrant-ridden cities in a pastoral, bucolic environment. In the postwar period, when suburban migration became an option open not only to the affluent but to the middle classes, and a mass phenomenon, an ideology of suburban desirability and city avoidance revived the antiurban attitude that had taken shape during the formative years of the nation. And the pastoral ideal came to be reinterpreted as the suburban lifestyle, while cities were in contrast viewed as sites of decay and degeneracy. This dominant discourse, which cites the decline of cities versus the growth and prosperity of the suburbs, has deep political implications. It allows suburbanites to feel not only indifference, but relief at having escaped the city and its self-destructive ghettos. But if there is one lesson to be learned from the May 1992 civil disturbances in Los Angeles, it was aptly stated by Henry Cisneros following his visit to the riot-torn area: "The white-hot intensity that became Los Angeles was the combustion of smoldering embers waiting impatiently to ignite for a long time." Other cities can easily ignite, as Spike Lee imaginatively demonstrated in DRT.

Most critics interpreted the movie's conclusion as an irresponsible encouragement to enact violence: the character impersonated by Spike Lee, Mookie, happens to be the one who initiates the riot by hurling a trash can through the window of Sal's pizzeria; this leads to the looting and burning of Sal's business. Though critics have emphasized the fact that by channeling black anger at Sal's property Mookie saved Sal's life, they have also viewed Mookie's diversionary tactics as advocating violence. Spike Lee ends his movie with apparently contradictory quotations from Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, which advocate, respectively, peaceful change and the use of retaliatory violence as a means of self-defense. Yet the choice between nonviolence
and retaliatory violence has no relevance to the working poor who are economically trapped in gang-infested urban ghettos. Spike Lee’s political message was premonitory as the American Assembly concluded its final report on the plight of U.S. cities: “We create the conditions of social unrest when we fail to address pent-up anger and frustration.”

“BROOKLYN: DO OR DIE” – RACIAL IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

Spike Lee has been sharply criticized for his romantically visioned vision of a clean and apparently drug- and crime-free Bed-Stuy where teenagers and unemployed young males congregate on brownstone stoops. Critics have rightly asked if Lee’s DRT creates a mythic ghetto, a wishful “kinder, gentler urban America.” Admittedly, Lee “made a conscious decision not to discuss drugs,” and this would have been acceptable had he not ignored the larger socioeconomic reality – the urban blight - that greets the visitor entering Bed-Stuy. With the exception of Jungle Fever and its dualistic representation of two brothers, the successful buppie Flipper and his crack-cocaine-addicted brother, Gator, Lee’s pre-1995 films avoid depicting drug dealing in the black community. Four years after Jungle Fever, Lee’s Clockers would openly confront the drug problem that has devastated black urban communities for the past twenty years. The hard-fought battles against residential segregation and unfair employment practices benefited the black middle class, which eventually escaped the overcrowded and badly maintained housing in the urban ghettos. The black ghetto has experienced two successive population movements: the first, in the earlier part of the century, brought an influx of southern rural Blacks into northern cities in search of better living conditions; the second, in the late 1960s, was an exodus of the black middle class from the inner cities as a result of the integrationist, legalistic strategy pursued by black elites from the turn of the century. This strategy proved ineffective in dismantling the barriers of de facto segregation and economic dependence. Deprived of its middle and upper classes, black inner-city neighborhoods remain caught in a cycle of sociocultural destruction that fosters drug dealing, gang warfare, and the destruction of black families.

Spike Lee’s generation is the immediate heir to the political and cultural legacy of the Civil Rights movement, which is evident in his iconographic use of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X in DRT and many of his other films. Lee preaches racial pride, but Buggin’ Out represents someone who wastes his energy on lost causes. By contrast, Da Mayor, a friendly old drunkard, is a valued spokesman of worldly wisdom and a repository of bedrock values. The difference in Lee’s treatment of Buggin’ Out and Da Mayor suggests that, in the absence of black entrepreneurs and a political agency, one can still maintain Da Mayor’s sense of decency. By showing people who are poor but who have nonetheless retained their dignity, Lee goes against the easy clichés that sustain conservative attacks on the welfare state. If, however, DRT had presented a realistic vision of Bed-Stuy, it would have reinforced the paranoia of many middle-class Americans who fear the day when poverty and homelessness will invade their well-insulated neighborhoods that are far from inner cities and its crime. DRT bolsters the more or less imaginary class and racial boundaries between certain Blacks and Whites who view the cities in fantastic terms, with marauding youth gangs in control of their increasingly monitored “public” spaces. Mike Davis claims that as long as the actual violence is more or less confined to the ghetto, gang wars, as shown in Boyz N the Hood, are a “voyeuristic titillation to white suburbanites.”

By showing an alternative to Boyz N the Hood’s throwaway ghetto, where a whole generation is doomed to a social if not physical death, and the middle-class suburbia of a privatized “citadel” city, Spike Lee’s DRT raises the issue of the territoriality crisis of in an African-American urban community. He implies that those who accept the failure of the Great Society and the ineffectiveness of welfare programs are not “doing the right thing.” Lee can therefore claim the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther
King, Jr., and Malcolm X, because their rhetoric and strategies do not contradict but complement each other. The true challenge is to confront what Mike Davis calls the “urban apartheid” and to formulate a policy that does not view self-defense and nonviolence, and separation and integration, as polar opposites. Spike Lee calls for a revitalization of black urban communities through a reappropriation of urban space. A failure to achieve this will perpetuate the present degraded forms of territorial inscription, such as turf wars among street warriors and marauding ethnic vigilantes. These phenomena exacerbate the already oppressive spatial confinement that stifles any quest for economic and spiritual self-betterment and its articulation between the individual and the collective that is a prerequisite of social action.37

MEDIATING THE EXPECTATIONS OF BLACKS AND WHITES

Spike Lee’s films become less ambiguous when one considers his political message. Despite the apparent contradictions and inconsistencies, a hard look at DRT reveals a unifying didactic discourse. Lee constantly interweaves a twofold narrative, manipulating his viewer and striking a responsive chord, alternatively, in Blacks and Whites. This movie was extremely controversial because many people stopped to take a seat in theaters to watch DRT. They saw, in the seemingly contradictory characters of Mookie, Buggin’ Out, and Radio Raheem, a continuation of the provocative, unsettling behavior Spike Lee generates in real life. If one considers, however, the ideological assumptions that sustain his narrative, then Lee is a mediator rather than an enfant terrible of American cinema. In his own way, he follows in the footsteps of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., another darling of the media and flamboyant spokesman of Harlem, yet another member of the New York African-American community. Powell was once regarded as the living symbol of the black metropolis and was deemed to be in the vanguard of black political activism.38 Powell and Lee embody the same unusual, volatile qualities and failings that make them either loved or hated as living challenges to the white power elites. The point here is not whether Spike Lee is of comparable stature to the majestic Powell, for whatever one’s opinion might be, it merely reflects the contemporary setting in which movie stars, TV anchors, rappers, and black filmmakers are asked their assessment of the “Black Thing.” Few black politicians are considered to be qualified leaders in the present crisis. In the aftermath of the May 1992 Los Angeles uprising, black entertainment personalities visited the Los Angeles South Central area and pleaded for a return to calm. Many elected officials prudently stayed away. One may argue that Spike Lee’s willingness to be the spokesman for the black community is inherently linked to this ontological dimension of the U.S. dilemma. There might be, however, some danger in crystallizing the frustrations and hopes of a whole community. For as Lee becomes a living metaphor of the socially acceptable African-American courted by the white establishment, he runs the risk of being marginalized or trivialized. This seems to have been the case when his Malcolm X created a media stir that was anticlimactic after the movie failed. Yet Spike Lee remains a forceful, multifaceted talent who, by playing upon a facade of social transparence and a racially implicit subtext, attempts to re-create a dialogue between Blacks and Whites.

NOTES

6. Ibid., p. 67.


9. Because of Spike Lee's appearance in Air Jordan commercials, black community leaders have accused him of reinforcing the buying habits of black youths and participating in the rising tide of black-on-black violence among inner-city youths.


18. Ibid., p. 140.


20. Ibid., p. 331.

21. Ibid.


31. See the final report to *Interwoven Destinies*, p. 340.


36. Ibid., p.270.
