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Polyphony and Cultural Expression
Interpreting Musical Traditions in *Do the Right Thing*

It has been generally accepted that classical Hollywood films incorporate music in order to construct and maintain an audience of passive consumers to whom the sound track is usually inaudible or invisible. In this model, film music exists to enhance the purported and desired seamlessness of the narrative (by covering over edits, and so forth). The conventional score is typically characterized by several elements, including a strong orientation to nineteenth-century European Romanticism, which prioritizes melody, lush sound, and full orchestration, and a frequent reliance on leitmotifs, which are variously associated with specific themes or characters. Music is used to orient and hook the spectator, from assisting in emphasizing visual cues to monitoring or manipulating physiological reactions to the film.

While studios of the 1950s promoted musicals as the ultimate fusion of new visual technologies and original aural spectacle in an attempt to reclaim the lost audience of the postwar years, the rock-and-roll films from the late 1950s on offered the same cinematic/sound feast as well as a new appeal to the youth audience or teen demographic market. The 1960s saw the positioning of popular rock music as a site of political and ethnic expression, while the late 1960s and 1970s saw previously subcultural forms of music (e.g., punk, reggae, and rap) infiltrate mainstream entertainment, including popular cinema.

Recently, as initially black, urban musical forms such as hip hop and rap began to be incorporated into and appropriated by dominant culture, rap films began to show up on the commercial screen (e.g., *Juice*, 1991, and *Menace II Society*, 1993). With the late twentieth-century proliferation of visual-aural media and media technology, audiences have to process and respond to an intermingling of video and audio phenomena on a level which exceeds classical, conventional film-music demands in the sheer amount of music involved and in the number of implicated musical traditions and references. (This is certainly not to imply that contemporary spectators are somehow more knowledgeable or sophisticated than past film audiences.)
Music, History, and the Films of Spike Lee

Spike Lee’s “authorial” position regarding music and narrative is uniquely oppositional (voicing black history within a traditionally white industrial context) and mainstream (promoting familiar black artists for commercial reproduction and consumption on a mass scale). From She’s Gotta Have It (1986) to Malcolm X (1992), Lee’s commercial film releases have been characterized by the use of multiple musical styles which connote black production, artistry, and history. While School Daze (1988) popularized “Da Butt” and used elaborate musical production numbers to debate “straight vs. nappy,” Mo’ Better Blues (1990) chronicle of Bleek Gilliam’s jazz career is overtly about music and performance. Jungle Fever (1991) uses several musical voices, although there is no overlap or intermingling among them: each musical tradition is assigned to a particular family of characters, while the film is dominated, overall, by Stevie Wonder’s original songs. A biographical epic, X omits titles as markers of historical progress and instead indicates the passage of time through interludes of music by recognizable black artists such as Lionel Hampton and Billie Holliday (and—by the closing credits—Arrested Development).

Lee is clearly conversant with classical musical use and narrative conventions. However, classical scoring and style form only one voice within Do the Right Thing’s (1989) multilayered text. Here, Lee manipulates convention in a traditional manner to orient spectators within the film-story. His departure from and expansion of traditional musical and visual expectations joins other musical traditions, such as jazz, the radio, and rap, with camera movement and visual design to visibly depart from the classical idiom. While classical techniques are apparent in the film, the overall effect of Lee’s layering is one of challenge to those expectations and to invisible style.

Do the Right Thing arguably represents his most
coherent use of music as interactive with and an essential component of visual representation and thematic, political concerns. The preexisting popular music (by groups such as Public Enemy and EU) and scored sound track of Do work together in a process of continual clash and merger, not as discrete segments. Unlike the artists featured in Jungle Fever or X, Public Enemy and EU were known primarily within black, urban culture prior to the film’s release—not as popular/mainstream. Finally, while Do is not overtly about music or musicians, it is Lee’s most thoroughly musical film—a film which posits rap music and rap style as commercially embraceable by the mainstream although inherently politically oppositional. For Lee, black musical production reflects black history and politics—through popular musical and aesthetic styles—which can be produced, marketed, and sold to a mass audience through cinema.

"Rap Aesthetic" and Spectatorial Address

Before the opening titles sequence of Do, a solo tenor saxophone plays a mournful variation upon “Lift Every Voice and Sing” over the symbol of Universal Pictures. The screen then goes black for a split second before a splash of hot red colors reveals a woman dancing vigorously, in several different street settings, to Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power.” While the backdrop and her bright spandex outfits change, the actress remains centrally framed, as all cuts are made on action. Although this sequence has been criticized for its apparently narratively unmotivated music-video-like style and its objectification of Rosie Perez, it is extremely significant for its foregrounding of an immediate, equivalent, and codependent alliance between the film’s visual image and the musical sound track.

The opening sequence introduces Do’s rap aesthetic—a visual style which adopts the formal characteristics (including rapid cuts and shifts in framing, and references to multiple styles and genres from music video to direct cinema and from melodrama to documentary) and thematic concerns of rap music (especially as it is characterized by the “politicized” voice of black, urban males). The film continues to use non-diegetic and diegetic music together with ambient noise, silence, dialogue, and the visual image to create a play of competing and merging voices. These voices, as in rap, “sample” or combine snatches of musical traditions which are historically and culturally associated with or coded as black American forms such as blues and popular soul music. Dialogical voices are primarily those of young urban African Americans. Here, even before the titles, and then during the titles but long before the narrative begins, an aural dialectic is at work: two black American musical traditions—historic/jazz and contemporary/rap—are juxtaposed within the same space.

Do uses music nonconventionally, or obtrusively, in order to complement its formal style and thematic concerns. The amount of music and blend of multiple musical styles is used in a near-assaultive manner in specific sequences of the film, purposely giving the overall viewing experience a quality of excess and spectatorial challenge similar to the rapid-fire address of rap’s oral appeal. Do’s provision of space for the expression and competition of multiple ethnic and generational voices— although they are predominantly male—denies the emergence of any singular empowered voice. Potentially, then, the film is a “space of the vocal (oral ethnography, people’s history, slave narratives) . . . way(s) of restoring voice to the silenced”—a description which also defines the terrain and aspiration of much rap expression. Even if Do’s aims and accomplishments are not so ideologically suggestive, the film issues a challenge to the classic spectator, who is conceived as passive and soothed by music of which s/he is unaware.

The dialogical dynamism implied by Spike Lee’s use of diverse musical traditions suggests music’s active engagement of an audience which may or may not be culturally fluent in the vocal play of these texts. While the film’s music could be heard only musically (or not in terms of its cultural associations), its invocation of musical styles which are distinctly grounded in predominantly black cultural experience challenges the spectator to actively position her/himself against or within those traditions—to be, in fact, overtly aware of the symbolically laden values of the music as a separate text in addition to its filmic-narrative value.

Lee’s audience thus breaks down into knowing or informed readers who are culturally inscribed within or by the discursive power and social significance of particular musical styles, and other viewers who are challenged to become educated to an exchange of cultural voices which typically remain absent or silent from their sphere of cultural-ideological operation. Perplexed responses to the film’s ending and the hypothetical space the multiple-voiced text provides would seem to indicate the fragmented subjectivity which is promoted in Do’s spectators, as continual negotiation of the different musical voices of the text is required in
order to fully engage the narrative. Ultimately, it might be asked whether Do’s musical address calls for a new type of spectatorship or a reworking of classical cinematic reception away from a model of passive consumption toward a conception of active negotiation of preexistingly familiar (aural) texts, couched in an original (visual) context.

I will argue here that close analysis of Do’s “polyphonic” approach to aural content—as it is coordinated with visual style—explains and illustrates the significance of Lee’s assertion that it is his “most political film.” However, this assertion is examined through an inflected orchestral style which also incorporates jazz and blues music and instrumentation. Because of its thematic use in the film and by virtue of its mediated nature (Coplandesque orchestral to bluesy jazz combo), this tradition can be referred to as the “historic-nostalgic” style. The historic-nostalgic tradition is embodied in the original sound-track music scored for the film by William Lee, the director’s father. It serves primarily as background music or underscoring but, at some points, it intersects with the second tradition—of contemporary, popular commercial music. This second tradition has two modes of expression within the film:

Musical Traditions in Do the Right Thing

Two distinct musical traditions are employed to create symbolic meaning via their place in Do’s particular social-historical, cultural context. The first of these traditions is a romantic, American folk-rap music (“Fight the Power”)—which is played continuously by one of the characters, Radio Raheem, on his giant “boom box”—and the soul and R&B records played by Mister Señor Love Daddy, a disc jockey on the neighborhood radio station, We Love Radio 108 FM.

For the most part, both the rap and soul strains of the contemporary/commercial tradition exist strictly as diegetic music, although there are scenes in which the music carries over from another context in which it is not explicitly visually linked to the apparatus producing the music. Part of the narrative significance of the film’s source music is tied to the fact that all the songs have lyrics, some of which are more significant and audible than others. Love Daddy also presents a dialogic pattern which flows in and out of and bridges these lyrical texts. The film employs the historic-

and qualified by the fact that, for Lee, commercial popular cultural artifacts which are produced by blacks—here, explicitly music (the word), but also fashion (the image)—are inherently political, as they emerge from a position marginalized by dominant control of capital and communication.

Mookie (Spike Lee, right) and his employer’s son Vito (Richard Edson)
nostalgic tradition and the commercial-contemporary tradition to delineate geographic space (a block in the largely black urban neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn) and historical moment (i.e., the topicality of the subject matter and theme, in this space of race relations between African Americans, Italian Americans, Koreans, and Latinos), and to clarify characterization (both of and within urban black culture and generationally).

The Historic-Nostalgic Tradition

Universal Studio’s press information which anticipated Do the Right Thing’s release described composer William Lee as “the noted bassist, composer and arranger of eight folk-jazz operas.” Folk-jazz is probably the best description of Lee’s background music, which is included in almost 30 minutes of the 120-minute film. His nondogetic score, structured by conventional folk and more unconventional jazz strains (ranging from low-key bluesy solos to virtual funk explosions), assists in Do’s complex interweaving of communal aspirations and ideals with the clash of generational and individual aspirations and intolerances.

While the stringy folk inflections complement the sense of history and togetherness felt by the residents of the block and suggest the time-tested wisdom of Mother Sister and Da Mayor’s generation by repeatedly associating with them, the jazz strains, often associated with Mookie and Sal, suggest active, contemporary, struggling, and unresolved voices in the polyphonic work. As Marshall Stearns has noted, jazz, as a musical and cultural voice, is “distinguished by an immediacy of communication, an expressiveness characteristic of the free use of the human voice . . . European harmony, Euro-African melody, and African rhythm.” The folk-orchestral and the African-American musical tradition of jazz represent voices which are, respectively and symbolically, one of status quo and nostalgic association (aligned with assimilation, passivity, and social acceptance) and one of continual resistance and assertiveness (aligned with exceptionalism, activity, and social change).

Composed for William Lee’s Natural Spiritual Orchestra, the score’s instrumentation puts a heavy emphasis on multiple strings, which is what most clearly lends it its folk tone. The Coplandesque composition of these underscored segments is evocative of such value-laden symbols as heritage, neighborhood, and community—reflective of a block which is, on the surface, a unified place. This sense of stability is reinforced by the composition’s strict adherence to classic cinema conventions for background music, including the maintenance of mezzo-forte dynamics, an emphasis on tonal, resolving harmonic patterns and melody, and unobtrusive instrumental entrances and exits in which the musical line elides gently into the next scene or resolves to a quiet, dominant chord that fades imperceptibly into an edit.

The folk-style idiom exists, visually, “in the streets,” or as a component of the community which integrates the spectator into the Bed-Stuy universe. It is used to introduce the neighborhood characters: Smiley, a young adult with cerebral palsy who preaches the words of Malcolm X; Sal Frangione, the owner of Sal’s Famous Pizzeria, and his sons; and Mother Sister and Da
Mayor, the literal and symbolic old guard of the block who have seen its history and are wary of its future. There are at least 16 significant occurrences of historic-nostalgic themes in the film. Two of these are associated with two of the film’s primary characters—Mookie and Sal. Four out of five times, Mookie’s theme is heard when he is outside of his workplace (Sal’s Famous Pizzeria)—traversing the neighborhood on pizza delivery runs which require the camera to follow along, thus capturing the block’s constant activity. This theme underscores Spike Lee’s recurring concern with older and younger generations, their knowledge, histories, and differing responses to contemporary problems of race relations. It is present, for example, as Mookie acknowledges Mother Sister, the eyes and ears of the block from the older generation, and Mister Señor Love Daddy, who represents the middle generation. Sal’s theme is associated with his pizzeria and his family, their history, and their current struggles as a Bed-Stuy business. These musical motifs establish a crucial theme regarding the interconnectedness of private lives and public space, or the inability of individuals to escape the neighborhood’s gaze and judgment over private actions.

The historic-nostalgic score implies here that an idyllic community is realizable. Such a community takes heed of the knowledge of its elders and embraces the present with youthful enthusiasm. These themes are introduced in moments of placidity and neighborhood communication or in the context of family relationships and a discussion of social issues. Each occurrence is tied to expressions of the neighborhood’s closeness as a community with an extensive history of people who know one another and literally watch over one another. These unifying themes are supported by the use of long tracking shots which enable visualization of the entire block (from within Sal’s and outside) and establish the locus for the film’s action.

**Jazz, Heat, and Race**

Do’s characters, however, also are struggling with ever-present prejudices and biases of and toward those who are not like them (the Korean market owners and, eventually, Sal and his sons) or who are somehow separable from that same community. If the string-orchestral strains of music suggest a desired communal ideal, jazz strains in the score hint at a barely repressed undercurrent of turbulence and unrest, and imply the tremendous frustrations and simmering threat of violence.

The second entrance of Sal’s theme, for example, takes place in a tense environment as he and his openly racist son, Pino, discuss the future of the pizzeria in Bed-Stuy as opposed to their home turf of Italian-American Bensonhurst. Pino becomes increasingly frustrated and violently animated, asserting his disgust with his life and surroundings. Sal, on the other hand, grows increasingly dejected in the face of such anger directed at his life’s work. The voices from the neighborhood which are interjected here are those of the “corner men”—who sit on the street corner all Saturday, commenting on local activity—and Smiley, who approaches Pino and Sal to sell photographs of black political leaders.

The music in this sequence enters with a solemn, slowly descending piano line. This same melody is later picked up by a violin, then a cello, a soprano sax, and a group of violins. Next, with a strong undercurrent
of strings and ascending piano chords, the jazz section emerges. A solo soprano saxophone accompanied by a piano and trap set launches, with increasing intensity and higher pitch, into fevered improvisational runs.

Visually, Sal and Pino’s scene is matched with the music in intensity and color. The sequence begins with a slow track from the back wall of the pizzeria to a two-shot of Sal and Pino, who sit at a front table. The opening track matches the slow piano scale and settles into a relatively static two-shot as both come to rest. From Sal’s, however, external action is visible and takes place on several planes. The neighborhood is, in fact, ever-present and ever-visible (and, equally, ever-watchful of the pizzeria). The layered pieces of the jazz combo and the improvisation in this particular scene, then, act as companions to the action which confronts Pino and Sal from the outside and in some ways pries them apart, anticipating the tragic events to come.

Spike Lee’s desire for the visual design of his film was that it would “look hot . . . . The audience should feel like it’s suffocating.”10 The improvisational interludes Branford Marsalis interjects into folk-jazz sequences elaborate upon and intensify this effect. These passages evoke a fevered, aggravated play with chromatic intervals which translates into a sense of struggle and a lack of harmonic expression.

Rap Style: “In-Your-Face Explosive”11

As Tricia Rose’s discussions of rap note, it is a musical style which is representative of both resistance and mediation. The “tension between rap’s confining rhythmic patterns and its aggressive presentation potentially assaults,” and the “end of the song brings relief”—especially for the white middle-class listener, who may feel threatened by rap’s lyric and percussive demands. Rap is a “complex fusion of folk orality and post-modern technology,” a form whose style and substance consist of compromise.12

If instrumental music expresses that which is not verbalizable in culture, rap is made even more potentially threatening by its basis in verbalization, or the word.13 Rap, as an increasingly popular commercial musical form, is one for which “melody is clearly secondary to the primary interest. . . . [Its] songs . . . are incantations, chants which can correctly be seen as thematic variations on the question of power, racism, class.”114 Because of Western culture’s proclivity to binarism and the polarization of spoken language and singing, rap’s dialogic, rhythmic, linguistic structure, combined with its sampling of everything from former pop hits to television theme songs (or its pastiche form and overt political message and intent) combine to render it potentially disjunctive amid conventional musical forms.

Lee’s choice of rap in Do as an inescapable diegetic element emphasizes his expressed political concerns and focus. His use of the rap music of Public Enemy presents a challenge to convention by insisting on spectator attention to its consuming presence, which drowns out any competing dialogue and seems to guide framing and camera movement. The rap qualities determine the filmic.

Do uses “Fight the Power” in ten scenes, including the opening titles. With the exception of this titles sequence, “Fight” serves as the individualized, personal anthem of Radio Raheem, a black youth who is visually and dialogically constructed as strong, quiet, and commanding. Generally, “Fight” is heard from off screen, immediately before Raheem appears. Visually, Lee has enhanced the notion that Raheem and rap are physically powerful and aurally threatening by using sweeping camera movements which start on Raheem’s gargantuan boom box—exaggerated in close-up—and travel rapidly up his body to reveal his massive frame. Raheem is usually shot with the camera in a canted position and from a low angle, almost mimicking the position of the boom box itself and suggesting that the aural barrage of “Fight” sets things askew and assures Raheem/rap’s dominance of any given scene. The song is used as a sonic assault—it enters unpredictably, at an unmodulated, uncharacteristically loud volume. It is intended to be obtrusive.

The aural explosion created by “Fight,” reinforced by Lee’s exaggerated camera angles, suggests that rap is a potentially totalizing aesthetic system. In the presence of the “word,” one’s worldview (via Lee’s camera lens) is altered—or at least made alterable. Rap’s association with the youthful Raheem, its aggressive political message (here), and its capacity to set the entire neighborhood at attention (aurally and spatially) imply that his generation of black youth is allied with change, in contrast to Mother Sister and Da Mayor’s accommodationist stances. Significantly, however, Raheem himself is almost entirely silent. He does not speak the language of rap, he is “spoken by” it. Communication, for Raheem, is enacted by both the aural dominance of rap and the visual symbols of hip-hop culture. Raheem’s knuckle rings and Nikes are part of a network of consumer goods which displace individual expression and re-present it via shorthand mate-
rial markers which are both representable to and understandable across a generalized social field (e.g., as connoting contemporary American, urban, black, male, youth—whether or not worn exclusively by such individuals).

It should be noted, however, that one of the methods Do the Right Thing uses to promote audience sympathy for Raheem and to portray the complete senselessness of his death is to gradually render Public Enemy’s tract familiar via its repetition. Overall, the spatial (noise pollution because of its unmodulated volume and its encroachment on silent space) and the verbal (politicized lyrics, in comparison to the surrounding environment; that which speaks the unspeakable) content of the song are, finally, rendered relatively nonconfrontational. While this familiarity, significantly, allows for the sale of Public Enemy’s music outside of the film—as featured on the sound-track album—non-threatening status is, equally, narratively conferred upon Radio Raheem, whose literal lack of voice throughout the film enables his image or iconographic status within the neighborhood to supersede his individual persona, thus promoting the film’s heroization of the youth at the close of the narrative and into the end credits.

While “music can act on the body” and thus trigger emotional responses “through its rhythm (speed and emphasis of beat), its dynamics (loudness or softness) and its pitch (high or low),”15 Lee uses overlapping dialogue and ambient sound, which frequently share these characteristics, to play “musical” roles. Sal’s Famous Pizzeria is unique in Do because it is such a quiet site. On the six occasions in which music is used in Sal’s, two are the unwelcome rap intrusions made by Raheem, three include entrances from or exits to the street—thus incorporating the neighborhood/external context—and two of these sequences are explicitly associated with Mookie’s theme. Sal’s “no music” assertion is, therefore, one which holds fast. In the pizzeria, expressions of racial and class differences or discussions of sociocultural conflicts are suppressed.
Buggin Out is thrown out for asking that there be “brothers up on this Wall of Fame . . . Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Michael Jordan” who would reflect Sal’s clientele and its interests, as opposed to the photos of Italian-American celebrities. Sal’s prominent display of Frank Sinatra’s photograph, in particular, references a musical voice which is not aurally present but which is nonetheless visually and socially perceptible, thus contributing to the text’s web of dialogical voices, voices which are portrayed as inadequate or even obsolete in contemporary urban America.

Radio Raheem’s Public Enemy not only imposes music upon Sal’s space, it also infuses the popular neighborhood hangout with unwelcome social criticism from a young, urban, black, male perspective:

While the black man’s sweatin’
In the rhythm I’m rollin’
Got to give us what we want
Got to give us what we need
Our freedom of speech is the freedom of death
We got to fight the powers that be
To revolutionize make a change
What we need is awareness
Power to the people, no delay.16

When Raheem first enters Sal’s, he is shot from a low angle; Sal, behind the counter, is shot from above. Wide-angle lenses flatten Sal into his wall, while Radio Raheem’s face is distorted and becomes ominously large and looming. These visual power relations are enhanced by the use of canted framing. Once Raheem voluntarily turns his music off—after Sal’s screaming appeals (his world will not be challenged or altered by “that noise”)—shots are framed from a neutral angle, at medium-long-shot distance. Visually and aurally, Raheem’s music brings the current of tension at Sal’s out into the open.

Raheem’s final entrance to the pizzeria is accompanied by Buggin Out and Smiley as they come to
inform Sal of their boycott. The sound of the boom box precedes their entrance, which is again accompanied by a canted frame and shot from a low angle. As tensions rise in the scene and Sal breaks down to screaming racist invectives, he “kills” Radio Raheem’s box by smashing it repeatedly with a baseball bat. From this point through the ensuing riot, killing of Raheem, and destruction of Sal’s—a time-span of approximately 12 film minutes—there is no music on the sound track, only ambient noise and sound effects. The “silence” of the sound track at this moment (although it is filled with rioting noise) would seem to enhance—especially in light of the historic-nostalgic tradition’s function—the film’s tone of complete chaos and social breakdown. The spectator is cast in a participatory role by virtue of the absence of any music which would soothe the tension and violence. The audience is thus set on the same plane as the riot’s observers and participants, by hearing only what they hear. Without any voice to comment on the action, the spectator’s identification is set adrift.

Contemporary Soul Radio

If the historic-nostalgic and rap styles of music ostensibly represent opposite poles of convention, then Mister Señor Love Daddy’s neighborhood radio station appears to serve as a bridge between the two, both aurally with regard to genre and generationally with regard to characterization. In accord with Eisler’s and Adorno’s idea that “music bears the sociological/psychological value of evoking the collective community,” the radio station’s “social function is that of a cement, which holds together elements that otherwise would oppose each other unrelated. . . . It binds” neighborhood inhabitants together “into a community of listener-participants.”17

The station is an organizing voice for the neighborhood because of the disc jockey’s on-air narrative patter. Mister Señor Love Daddy’s linguistic authority, together with the mixture of recorded music he plays, forges a loose connection with Radio Raheem’s rap. Love Daddy’s talk and his records also parallel the folk-jazz idiom in bridging edits and evoking a harmonious neighborhood environment.18 His voice and music, emanating from each available source on the block, suggest his position as a mediator among phonically voiced audiences.

The contemporary selections the radio station plays reflect 108 FM’s diverse neighborhood audience, from the a capella of Take 6, the dance music of EU, and the ballads of Al Jarreau and Perri to the salsa of Rubén Blades and the reggae of Steel Pulse.Thematically, apart from the suggestion that Love Daddy’s omnipresence establishes the radio station as an object of communal understanding and discourse, 108 FM also serves an educational function. While Love Daddy voices his dismay about the racial differences and insanities which led to violence (“My people, my people. What can I say? Say what I can. . . . Are we gonna live together? Together we are gonna live?”), he equally heralds the richness of black culture in a rhythmic salute to a potential Wall of Fame for the community to truly call its own. This “roll call” is a voiced poetic collection of names such as Mahalia Jackson, Duke Ellington, Anita Baker, and Aretha Franklin, underscored by the folk-jazz music of William Lee. (Notably, most of these artists are Motown recording artists, thus referencing Berry Gordy’s black-owned-and-operated business, artistic success, and “family” work-ethos, as well as indirectly advertising the sound-track album, which was produced on the Motown label.) The roll call is visually matched with a montage of the neighborhood’s history, its old-timers, Mother Sister, Da Mayor, the corner men, and the patrolling police. Thematically, Love Daddy’s dialogue here connects black cultural heritage and pride with the neighborhood’s cultural heritage and pride. Lee positions Bed-Stuy as a microcosm of contemporary black culture.19

Do concludes with end titles that are introduced by Love Daddy’s dedication of an orchestral piece to Radio Raheem which elides into the (recognized unofficial black national) anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” Lee’s presentation of balancing quotes by Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X parallels the opening credits sequence in the critical attacks and confusion it has drawn. Within the logic of the competing musical voices throughout the film, however, the quotes reinforce Do the Right Thing as a text of purposefully, unresolvably conflicting voices, each with committed desires and goals. King discusses the value of an integrated community of “brotherhood” in “dialogue”—an ethos which is symbolized in the film by orchestral themes and the older generation that holds the unity of the block/neighborhood family as the highest good. Malcolm X speaks to individual sufferings and disparities (the experiences shared by the community but felt differently by each person) in terms of the advocacy of violence in self-defense—an address which appears to be acutely relevant in the case of the young generation in Bed-Stuy, for whom dialogue has failed (Sal and Raheem literally do not speak the same language) and physical action is the only response left.
Spectatorship and Commodity Practice

Do the Right Thing’s indulgence in a rap aesthetic implies that the film threatens to reconstruct or to expressly confront the cinematic spectator with her/his act of listening/viewing and her/his reaction to the text. The fundamental aurality of Do combined with its hot look and camera movements conspires to create an address which is perhaps much further in its operation from cinematic suturing than it is similar to the affective, physiological response generally attributed to music as music or—and perhaps most provocative for further study—to the interpellative strategies of television as an “ongoing video collage.”

Certainly, Spike Lee’s background in commercial and music video production often provides an opening for a predictably traditional criticism of his films which, negatively, suggests that his work has more “in common with Madonna than with Malcolm X.” Lee’s “politicized” voice is most conflicted—in its calls for immediate racial and economic representation, recognition, challenge, and change—as his films grant expression to voices which are typically marginalized in relation to the mainstream only for those oppositions to be subsumed by larger commodification practices which recoup them for popular sale as black history and politics. Perhaps in spite of themselves, however, Lee’s films may represent a provocative, positive fusion of a prolific, chameleonlike visual-aural aesthetic—a fusion which incorporates diverse youth concerns (in terms of response rather than generational affiliation) and plays with spectator activity and popular knowledge in an unprecedented fashion.

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Notes

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1. Claudia Gorbman, Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 58, 75. Gorbman refers to “untrooublesome viewing subjects.” “Film music,” here, includes both nondiegetic and diegetic music. Nondiegetic music—or what is conventionally conceived of as “sound-track music”—is that
which, Gorbman notes, is typically meant to be invisible. Diegetic music is audible to the characters within the film.


4. Ibid., p. 256.

5. See, for example, David Denby, “He’s Gotta Have It,” New York magazine (June 26, 1989), pp. 53–54.

6. Lee’s films in general would seem to support such an inquiry. I would argue that many films of the “New Black Hollywood” movement of the 1980s and 1990s challenge traditional subjectivity aesthetically and through aural content and style.


18. Stam, “Bakhtin, Polyphony,” p. 25. As Robert Stam’s analysis of Bakhtin notes, while the “visual organization of space . . . is a metaphor of exclusions and hierarchical arrangements . . . the concept of voice” and, by extension, music, “suggests a metaphor of seepage across boundaries which . . . redefines spatiality itself.”


James Goodwin

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