

Bellwether for Social Change: Spike Lee and the Themes of African-American Society*

(社会変革の旗手—スパイク・リーとアフリカ系
アメリカ人社会のテーマ)

William A. Harris**

SUMMARY IN JAPANESE: スパイク・リーの映画はアフリカ系アメリカ人や広くアメリカ人社会に対して教訓的なメッセージをもった挑戦的で示唆に富んだものである。

彼はこれらの映画を通し、我々に覚醒を促しているのである。また彼はアフリカ系アメリカ人に対する、そして彼等同胞同士による暴力の停止を訴えている。彼は5本の映画を通じて問題提起を続けてきた。本論ではこれら5本のスパイク・リーの映画の主人公に焦点をあて「アフリカ系アメリカ人の抑圧」「男性優位」「アフリカ系アメリカ人同士の内部対立」「この世の快楽の虚しさ」といった4つの主要テーマを分析するものである。

In his brief career to date, Spike Lee has established a presence in the film industry and in the minds of his audience. His films are challenging and thought-provoking, with didactic messages for the several segments of his audience. Clearly, he is urging us to "Wake up!" But over and above our somnolence, Spike is concerned about aspects of our interpersonal and collective behavior. In his five films which have been distributed to mass audiences certain themes appear continually. This analysis focuses on the protagonists in these five films in terms of the representation and philosophy of four major themes contained therein.

* This is revised version of a paper prepared for presentation at the Western Conference on Literature, Film and the Humanities, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, January, 1992. This research was supported, in part, by the U.S. Department of Education.

** Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA.

The Oppression of African-American Workers

African-Americans face a cycle of deprivation regarding jobs, housing, and education. In order to develop socially and economically as an ethnic group, it is necessary to break into this cycle at some point. Spike Lee demonstrates to us the oppression experienced by African-American workers in the search for opportunity and he depicts their struggle against that oppression. The inequities faced by the black worker are examined in *Jungle Fever*, *Mo' Betta Blues*, and *Do the Right Thing*. In these three films there are situations in which the hero is constrained in his efforts to actualize and progress in his career because of countervailing economic control by white entrepreneurs. The ethnicity of the white oppressor differs in each case, but the message is the same: there will be no increase in reward regardless of excellence in performance.

The inequities of the corporate world are shown to us in meetings between Flipper Purify and the bosses in *Jungle Fever*. When Flipper seeks the fulfillment of a promise that he would be made a partner in the firm, his quest is adamantly refused. The senselessness of the routine stifling of black ambition is apparent to us. We are led to believe in the rightness of Flipper's position. But, he is not to prevail in his quest for a partnership because of some reason that we cannot really understand: "We can't do it right now. Now is not the time." It is as though Jerry and Leslie are treating him as a child or a pet who is told, "You can have the candy when I say and not before." It is an arbitrary and capricious refusal to recognize his ability and contribution. Flipper is being cozened by white liberals who are willing to suffer the black presence in the workplace as long as they can continue to exert white control (cf. Tucker 1972). It is possible to trace Flipper's extramarital affair with Angela Tucci to a similar scene with the bosses, when they insist that his request for a black secretary is unreasonable. Flipper, in turn, sees as unreasonable his role as the token person of color in the company, but he acquiesces and gives Angie a trial. When asked about his workday, Flipper replies that he is "just a poor black man facing the struggle in corporate America." We take the statement as a bit of cant and with a grain of salt, but the intricacies of the struggle are apparent in the scenes with the bosses.

In *Mo' Better Blues* Bleek Gilliam and his agent, Giant, face a similar scene of rejection by whites in power in the organization. The petition in Bleek's case is for a more equitable share of the profits being generated by his cel-

ebred jazz quintet. First, Bleek's boyhood buddy and manager, Giant, approaches the owners of "Beneath the Underdog." Giant tries to evoke the clearly apparent popularity of the band as grounds for an increase in salaries. His argument is refused because of the originally negotiated contract. Artistry is one thing but business is another.

MOE: It's out of the question.

GIANT: Everybody's making money except the artists.

MOE: Don't hand me that artist doo-doo. They don't have any financial risks. Go listen to the music.

(He dismisses Giant with a wave of the hand.) (Lee 1990:239).

In his round with the owners, Bleek initially bases his appeal on the equity of the situation.

BLEEK:...I came here to speak about the great sums of money you two are making off my music and the little I see in return.

MOE:...Giant, your manager, was the one who negotiated this deal. One you agreed to.

JOSH: And it's always been our business policy to never ever—

MOE:—ever never—

JOSH:—renegotiate the deal.

(Bleek is stuck.) (Lee 1990:249-50).

Failing this, Bleek attempts a humanitarian argument.

BLEEK: I trust him. He's honest. I can't say that about you, Moe, or your first-class cousin.

MOE: Nobody can be trusted. Everyone steals. Everyone is crooked. The trick is to walk out of the deal with as much of your shirt on as possible.

BLEEK: Y'know what that sounds like? ...like the long, long history of Black artists being exploited.

MOE: Everybody exploits everybody. (Lee 1990:250).

Friendship is one thing but business is another.

JOSH: We have a binding contract. (Lee 1990:251).

The club owners and the musician form a set piece in the entertainment world. The entertainer is always underpaid and the club owner is never making enough money. Yet, fortunes are made from the talents and careers of entertainers who die impoverished at an early age. Spike Lee gives us a peek behind the curtain as the club owners total their profits.

(Josh is behind the calculator, doing his numbers. He does not even look at the calculator, just the receipts and papers in front of him.)

MOE: What does it look like?

JOSH: It looks good.

MOE: What do the numbers say?

JOSH: The numbers look good.

MOE: Good.

JOSH: The numbers never lie.

MOE: That's what I like about numbers. People start lying from the crib, but not numbers.

JOSH: Moe, the numbers never lie.

[In front of the club, "Beneath the Underdog."]

(People begin to line up early to get in.) (Lee 1990:234).

Equity is one thing but business is another. For all the good works of the John Hammonds and Norman Granz's of the world, one wonders if our entertainment geniuses would survive longer with less notoriety and a more equitable share of profits.

In *Do the Right Thing*, as Mookie attempts to discharge the duties of a young unwed father, it is clear that his job is a hindrance to his efforts. He is continually taunted and harassed by Pino, the boss's older son. And Sal, his boss, is unsympathetic to Mookie's needs on the one hand, and crudely seductive towards Mookie's sister, Jade, on the other. In a brief scenario Spike Lee reveals to us Sal's duplicity in his relations with Mookie. Following a break for a "quick shower" on the hottest day of the year, Mookie returns to face the music at Sal's Famous Pizzeria.

SAL: Mookie, you are pushing it. You're really pushing it. I'm not pay-

ing you good money to fucking jerk me around.

(Mookie has nothing to say.)

SAL: You're gonna be in the street with the rest of your homeboys.

PINO: Bout time, Pop.

(ANGLE—DOOR)

(Jade enters, and Sal looks up. He stops blasting Mookie and a very noticeable change comes over him.)

SAL: Jade, we've been wondering when ya would pay us a visit.

JADE: Hi, Sal, Pino, Vito.

VITO: What's happening, Jade?

JADE: Nuthin' really. How are you treating my brother?

SAL: The Mook? Great. Mookie's a good kid. (Lee 1989:204-5).

It does not make for a good day at the office.

Mookie and Flipper, the protagonists who react against or in the face of economic oppression, suffer further loss. But, even Bleek, who continues to pursue his art in the wake of inequity, suffers loss. What is the Lee-ian view of oppression? It is possible that he interprets oppression as an infection which emerges as a curse even if it is not directly hindering and disruptive.

The Exploitation of Women

A theme which emerges in each of Spike Lee's first five films concerns the treatment of women by men. Spike's women are subject to the whims and fantasies of men. The women are controlled by men. Men are the actors and women the acted upon. In *Jungle Fever* the imbalance of the relationships is seen most clearly. The ultimate justification for Flipper's attraction to Angie and the disorganization of both their lives is that he was "curious." He even attempts to extend his control into her motivation for entering into the affair, by deeming her to have been curious as well.

Because of the racial dynamics of American society, the concept of race leaps to mind as the motivating and salient element in the interracial affair we see in *Jungle Fever*. We should consider the matter further.

The seduction of Angie, although patently exploitative, is neither as crass nor compulsive as Spike Lee presents it. On the contrary, it is extremely

commonsensical and realistic. Flipper may be curious about the White Woman, but his curiosity remains dormant until the stranger enters his space. Through a gradual process of overcoming prejudice, comparing experiences, gaining confidential insights and becoming familiar the two are drawn together. Their liaison is scripted and predicted by Hannibal Lector's generalization: we covet that which we see every day (Harris 1989:227).

Spike Lee has replicated the nuances of the archtypical extramarital affair. The realistic and typical romance presented in *Jungle Fever* originates in pedestrian rather than predatory urges, and is enacted between acquaintances who have become familiar. We do not bed the hunk from the supermarket nor the beauty from the laundromat. Instead we are attracted incrementally to those whose form and face we have come to know. Our emotions are aroused by the familiar voice embodied by the sexual mysteries that we can only wonder about. This is the real love affair, the casting aside of discretion and frustration to act out the irresistible fantasy. This is the love affair that occasions surprise on the part of friends and anguish on the part of spouses, the affair with the coworker or the spouse's close friend.

At the outset Angie's complicity in the initiation of the affair is not completely manifest, if it exists at all. When Flipper tells her, "I've never cheated on my wife before," there seems to be no motivation for his confession. But before we can think twice she has captured him completely. We learn later that we have probably witnessed the loss of her virginity, gone in the wink of an eye.

Angie's family life prior to Flipper is one of thankless drudgery. She is taken as a matter of fact to be the housekeeper and surrogate mother for her father and brothers, in addition to her frequent employment as a secretary. Her neighborhood boyfriend seems at first glance to be an equitable, though lackluster, partner. We must entertain the idea that Angie, at some point, sees Flipper as the exotic knight who will carry her away from a mean and predictable future. Her intention is not clear at the outset, but she eventually comes to broach the topic of bearing Flipper's child. She is not just having a fling.

In considering Flipper's motivation for beginning the affair, we should consider his work situation. Flipper has been rebuffed by the bosses in his request for an African-American secretary. He grudgingly accepts Angie as an assistant; his grin often appears to be a grinding of teeth. He is also apprehensive about his chances for promotion at the firm. On the one hand it is possible that

Flipper, at some level, sees his seduction of Angie as a revenge against the bosses. On the other hand, Angie may represent a charm that Flipper must ingest in order to screw his courage in seeking the promotion. Note that it is only after the seduction that Flipper meets with the bosses about the partnership. And, he emerges from the meeting enraged and empowered to go forth and found his own firm. If the charm cannot work one magic, perhaps it can work another.

The concept of frustration and revenge arises again in connection with the behavior of Paulie Carbone, Angie's boyfriend in Bensonhurst. When first we see him, he is himself exploited in the same manner and for the same reasons as Angie. He is cast into the role of breadwinner and surrogate wife by his widowed father. In the end, however, he is seen to accost and approach a black woman, Orin Goode, for reasons that are not entirely clear. Is he exacting revenge against blacks, or perhaps against his father? It is of course entirely possible that he is, in fact, sincerely attracted to this lovely black woman. Whatever the case, in relationships constructed by Spike Lee the male makes the moves, calls the shots, controls the pace of the affair.

Flipper's relations with his wife, Drew, are also self-absorbed. In their final scene she is depicted crying while making love. Indications are that the errant husband has assumed and exercised a male prerogative in gaining access to her bed.

One of the saddest exploitations of woman by man to be seen in films is suffered by Jane Toussaint in *School Daze* when she obeys the command to fornicate with Half-Pint. In the harsh initiation rite Half-Pint was able to prevail in part because of the assistance of Jane and the other Gamma Rays. Julian, incensed, concocts a revenge to set his ego aright. Julian coerces Jane to lie with Half-Pint, offering her up as a "gift."

JULIAN: I told your cousin I would take care of you and that's what I'm goin' to do.

HALF-PINT: Big Brother Almighty, what are you talking about?

JULIAN: Tonight I'm giving you a gift, from me to you.

(Julian takes Jane by the hand.)

(CLOSE—JANE),

HALF-PINT: I can't.

(Jane looks as if somebody has just slit her throat. All the color is out of

her face and the tears soon follow.)

JULIAN: What do you mean? I know, we all know, you're still a virgin.
Go.

(ANGLE—GAMMAS)

(They begin chanting.)

GAMMAS: Go! Go! Go! (Lee 1988:314-5).

Jane complies and is devastated by the experience. But her degradation is not complete until Julian drives the final nail into the coffin of her self esteem.

(Yoda gets up and turns the doorknob, Half-Pint is there staring him in the face. His smile is wide as a mile. ...)

GAMMAS: Half-Pint! Half-Pint! Half-Pint! ...

DOUBLE RUBBER: How was it?

MUSTAFA: Was it like you imagined?

DOO-DOO BREATH: Or dreamed about?

SIR NOSE: Speech! Speech!

(Jane has her head down.)

HALF-PINT: C'mon, guys, leave us alone. That's enough. I'm gonna walk Jane to her car. ...

(Jane looks like a wreck, the tears have streaked her makeup. This is a woman who has lost all her self-worth.)

(... In rushes Julian. He grabs her by the hand and pulls her out from the Gammas.)

[In the hallway.]

JANE: I did what you said.

JULIAN: What is that?

JANE: I did it with Half-Pint.

JULIAN: What?

JANE: You told me.

JULIAN: The hell I did. You gave it up to Half-Pint? How could you? I thought you loved me. Now you're boning my own frat brother. My own frat brother. ...

(At this point Jane is gone. She loses it. She's on the express to a breakdown.)

JANE: Why are you doing this to me? (Lee 1988:319-20).

She has become a used and discarded object. Our hearts go out to her and we fear for her sanity and survival. She has been a true believer in her man, right or wrong. But she is forced to accept betrayal.

Bleek Gilliam, in *Mo' Better Blues*, is the master of his horn and consort to two women. His world is under his control. His behavior is brazen and self-centered. A woman is, in fact, an object for Bleek, albeit a beautiful object such as a rare musical instrument. She exists to be mastered and performed upon, a medium in which to express the virtuosity of his sexual prowess. There are scenes between a commanding Bleek and each of the women, Indigo and Clarke, in which he boldly expresses his cocksman's philosophy.

INDIGO: Bleek, you're a good brother, but you still don't know what you want.

BLEEK: Now I guess it's time for Confessions of a Modern Day Dog.

INDIGO: Like it or not, Bleek, you're a dog. A nice dog, but a dog, nonetheless.

BLEEK: I won't argue the point. You know how I am. It's no secret. With men — It's a dick thing. (Lee 1990:228).

CLARKE: ...Let's be real. What you and I do is not make love.

BLEEK: What would you call it?

CLARKE: It's definitely not making love!

BLEEK: Boning!

CLARKE: You've been a lot more imaginative.

BLEEK: I got a million of them. The Mo' Better.

CLARKE: Mo' what?

BLEEK: The Mo' Better makes it Mo' Better.

CLARKE: Anyway, ... we don't make love, you don't love me. But in the meantime I'll settle for some of that Mo' Better.

BLEEK: I also got some of that In Case of Emergency Break Glass Dick. ...

BLEEK (VOICE OVER): I don't know what you would call it, but whenever I'm making love to a woman, I find myself thinking about another woman, about her sexuality. Who knows they might be thinking of some other guy too! (Lee 1990:231-2).

The women do not go gladly to their debasement. There are scenes between a contrite Bleek and each of the women in which they confront him about his lack of focus and commitment in the relationship. The motivation for the ending of these affairs is represented in a montage of misnaming and complaining in which each of the women rail against Bleek's infidelity.

(CLOSE—CLARKE)

(Begins to tickle his underarms.)

(CLOSE—BLEEK)

BLEEK: Indigo, that tickles.

(Oop. He fucked up.)

(CLOSE—CLARKE)

CLARKE: Get off! What did you call me?

BLEEK: I called you your name.

(CLOSE—CLARKE)

CLARKE: The hell you did. I ain't deaf. Motherfucker, you called me Indigo.

(CLOSE—INDIGO)

INDIGO: Get off, Bleek, how in the hell could you call me her name? Here we are making love. I'm in your bed; Indigo, not Clarke.

(CLOSE—CLARKE)

CLARKE: I said Indigo, not Clarke (sic).

(CLOSE—INDIGO)

INDIGO: I've had it. And you say you love me.

(CLOSE—BLEEK)

BLEEK: I never said that.

(CLOSE—INDIGO)

INDIGO: You did too.

(CLOSE—BLEEK)

BLEEK: Well, I don't remember it.

(CLOSE—CLARKE)

CLARKE: Do you remember saying you care?

(CLOSE—BLEEK)

BLEEK: Now that I remember.

(CLOSE—CLARKE)

CLARKE: If you say you care for me, why in the fuck are you still

fucking Indigo? Don't give me that "it's a dick thing" shit either.

(CLOSE—BLEEK)

(What can he say?)

(CLOSE—INDIGO)

INDIGO: Don't give me that "it's a dick thing" shit either. (Lee 1990:254-5).

Bleek brushes off their challenges with a smirk and a shrug. After their departures he makes a halfhearted attempt to fill his bed. It is clear throughout, however, that his principal Muse is Terpsichore and not Erato. Only when his world is brutally crushed and his talent destroyed does Bleek come to earth and settle for the mundane existence of wife and home.

In *Do the Right Thing*, Tina gives us the impression that she is the harridan, the nagger, the constant complainer.

MOOKIE (On the telephone): I know I haven't seen you in four days. I'm a working man.

TINA (Off screen): I work too, but I still make time.

MOOKIE: Tina, what do you want me to do?

TINA (Off screen): I want you to spend some time with me. I want you to try and make this relationship work. If not, I'd rather not be bothered. (Lee 1989:180).

Tina, in fact, represents a community of women who are courted at an early age with promises that are never kept. They are compromised at first in terms of their reputations, and soon in terms of the time they must spend performing motherly duties. The rancor of their rhetoric matches the quality of male trustworthiness.

Mookie is a hustler. He is constrained from a serene and orderly lifestyle by the conditions of his existence. In Mookie's world opportunities for remunerative work are few and opportunities for hedonistic play are many. Jobs are hard to find and paychecks are skimpy. Mookie gives us the impression of a person constantly on the move to ferret out the next slim opportunity. Mookie has obligations in the form of a woman and her son whom he fathered. He has obligations to the fellas in the neighborhood. He has obligations to perform on the job. Rushing from one obligation to another he fully discharges none. In a

scene in which Tina has ordered a pizza we see the frantic attempt by Mookie to cover all the bases. Neither Speedy Gonsalves nor Superman could cover all the ground that Mookie attempts.

MOOKIE: Shit! I forgot [the ice cream].

TINA: Your memory is really getting bad. ...

MOOKIE: I can run out and get it.

TINA: No! No! You won't come back either.

MOOKIE: I can't be staying long anyway.

TINA: How long then?

MOOKIE: Long enough for us to do the nasty.

TINA: That's out. No! It's too hot! You think I'm gonna let you get some, put on your clothes, then run outta here and never see you again in who knows when?

MOOKIE: A quickie is good every once in a blue moon.

TINA: You a blue-moon fool.

MOOKIE: Then we'll do something else.

TINA: What else?

MOOKIE: Trust me.

TINA: Trust you? Because of trusting you we have a son. Remember your son? (Lee 1989:226-8).

The lone exception to Spike Lee's gallery of exploited women is Nola Darling in *She's Gotta Have It*. Nola is so completely liberated, so predatory, so acculturated to the masculine approach to romance that she perplexes her lovers.

MARS: Dependable? What? Are you on drugs? [Nola is]'bout dependable as a ripped diaphragm.

JAMIE: That's cold.

MARS: I'm not lying. Make a date with her, it's fifty-fifty she shows at all, let alone late. Last year I got two playoff tickets, y'know, da Knicks against the Celtics. ... I asked Nola if she wanted to go and she said, "Yes, I've always wanted to go to a Knick (sic) game."...

(CLOSE—MARS)

MARS: Do you know, she never showed. I missed the goddam first two quarters and guess what? Bernard King scored thirty-five points, just in

the first half. ... I wouldn't say Nola was dependable. (Lee 1987:340-1).

JAMIE: It was bad enough, Nola and all her male friends, but on top of that she had this one particular woman after her. That was a bit much for me. I had my suspicions about the both of them. I asked Nola point blank, was she involved with this female or what? She said no (Lee 1987:293).

Nola is presented as happy and in control of her world. She sips the nectar from the flowers of manhood, but she does not entirely relinquish her space nor her persona. She is centered. Although we are never quite sure of Nola's grand plan, she gives the impression of one who is surefooted in rocky terrain and trekking toward an ultimate Nirvana. The men cannot fathom her motive nor can they abide her equanimity.

JAMIE: ...You can see anybody but I can't. This shit has gone on long enough. I've tried to be open-minded but instead I'm being played for a sucker. (Lee 1987:336).

They do not recognize that she is recycling their own behavior, and it is doubtless that she populates their worst nightmares. Through Nola's eyes we gain a view of male society as it appears to women in the boudoir. It is quite different from the view presented to men in the locker room. Spike Lee uses the character of Nola to hold up a mirror to male society.

[The COME-ON scene: Quick cuts of BOGUS MEN talking as if they were trying to rap to Nola.]

DOG#1: Slim, you so fine I'd drink a tub of your bath water.

DOG#2: I wanna rock ya world.

DOG#3: If I was you, I'm the kinda guy you'd want to take home to meet your mother. Don't you agree?

DOG #4: Baby, it's got to be you and me.

DOG #5: You may not realize this but you are sending out strong vibes tonight. May I continue? You're lonely, you're alone, you're sad, you're confused, you're horny. You need a man like me to understand you. To hold you, to caress, to looove you. You need me. What's your phone number?

DOG#6: I know I only saw you for the first time in my life one minute ago but I love you.

DOG#7: I know I only saw you for the first time in my life one minute ago but I love you.

DOG#8: I love you.

DOG#9: I love you.

DOG#10: I—

DOG#11: —love—

DOG#12: —you.

DOG#13: I got my B.A. from Morehouse, my M.B.A. from Harvard. I own a new BMW 318i, I make fifty-three thou a year after taxes and I want you to want me.

DOG#14: Did you know I'm related to Michael Jackson on my mother's side of the family and Prince on my father's? No lie. We can call 'em up right now.

DOG#15: Baby, I got plenty of what you need. Ten throbbing inches of USDA government-inspected prime-cut grade-A TUBESTEAK!!!

(He sticks out his tongue.) (Lee 1987:285-8).

Spike Lee forces us to consider black male roles and the possibility of role reversal. But, has he built the character of Nola on a real character type in the black community? Probably not. A black woman with multiple partners is a woman besieged, controlled, put upon and demanded of on all sides. She has not the comfort and serenity of a Nola no matter what is her age, income or physical attributes. Through Nola's point of view, Spike Lee reveals males who act on the belief, "You're fine and you're mine."

Black on Black Crime

When we think on the violence that people wreak on one another, we must consider little murders of the soul as well as street violence in our communities. In large part Spike's concerns about the ill treatment of black people by black people are reflected in his portrayal of relations between males and females. Besides this, however, there are several other instances that bear analysis. In *School Daze*, for example, the brief confrontation between the college

students and the townies represents the deteriorating connections between the socioeconomic classes of the black American population (cf. Wilson 1980). At first glance the townies' animosity appears to be related to folkways of territory. Obviously, the restaurant is a local hangout and not intimately identified with the campus. On closer examination, however, there is revealed a difference in world view concerning intellectual manhood, political rhetoric, and black identity.

LEEDS (Off screen): Yoo-hoo! Over here.

GRADY: What do you want?

(ANGLE—LOCAL'S TABLE)

LEEDS (Effeminate voice): Do you boys go to Mission?

GRADY: Yeah.

LEEDS (Effeminate voice): Is it true what they say about Mission men?

(The locals scream.) ...

(Grady begins to rise. Slice holds him back.)

SLICE: Let's go.

(They get up and leave, the locals are close behind.)

[In the parking lot]

SLICE: Brother, what you want?

SPOON: We ain't kin.

LEEDS: And we're not your brothers. How come you college motherfuckers think you run everything? ...

You come into our town year after year and take it over. We were born here, been here, will be here all of our lives, and can't find work 'cuz of you. ...

We may not have your ed-u-ca-tion, but we ain't dirt either. ...

Are you Black?

(Those three words stop Slice in his tracks.) ...

(Slice walks up to Leeds, he's right in his face. The Fellas follow.)

SLICE: You got a legitimate beef, but it's not with us.

LEEDS: Who then?

SLICE: Don't ever question whether I'm Black. In fact, I was gonna ask your country, BAMA ass, why do you put those Jerri-curl, drip-drip chemicals in your black nappy hair?

EDGE: That's right, godddamnit.

SLICE: And on top of that, come out in public with those plastic shower caps on your heads.

JORDAN: Just like a bitch.

MOSES: Who you calling a bitch?

BOOKER T.: If the shoe fits.

(Leeds steps back, trying to take back the upper hand that the local yokels have obviously lost.)

LEEDS: I betcha you niggers think y'all are white. College don't mean shit, you'll always be niggers, always, just like us.

SLICE: You're not niggers.

(The Fellas leave, walking backwards, though; you never turn your back.) ...

[In the car]

MONROE: Do we really act like that? ...

You know, what that guy was saying about us.

SLICE: We're not Wannabees.

BOOKER T.: They were ignorant.

MONROE: I don't think so.

GRADY: Look, motherfuckers got to try and start to better themselves. Just like we're trying to do.

MONROE: Maybe they've tried and given up.

JORDAN: Grady, you think everything is always so simple.

GRADY: Hell, yeah. You work or you starve. I want to eat sirloin.

SLICE: The guy was right. (Lee 1988:274-8).

The rage of the townies is spontaneous and diffuse. The bewilderment of the college students is nearly complete; they grope for understanding. The scene is a border dispute between populations alien to one another. They are two groups with much in common who, because of the accidents of birth and background, are bound for different destinies. Yet, on each side the possibility of acquiring the other's destiny is clearly so near and still so far.

While the rage expressed in the standoff in *School Daze* is fairly gratuitous, a more brutal confrontation, for cause, is enacted in *Mo' Betta Blues* when Bleek and Giant are severely beaten in the alley behind the club.

GIANT (Off screen): BLEEK.

(Rhythm does a cymbal crash. Bleek leaves the bandstand while the band continues to play.)

(ANGLE—BACKSTAGE DOOR)

(The door is blocked by Eggy and Born Knowledge.)

BLEEK: Move outta the way.

EGGY: Bleek. Go in peace. I'm asking you, go in peace.

(Bleek pushes forward.)

BORN KNOWLEDGE: Go on. It won't be pretty.

[In the alley]

(Madlock and Rod hover over an unconscious Giant, who is choking on his own blood. ...)

(Bleek rushes to Giant and lifts his head off the cold and wet sidewalk.)

BLEEK: I WAS GETTING HIM THE MONEY TONIGHT.

MADLOCK: Too little. Too late.

ROD: He's not dead. He'll be alright.

(Bleek takes a wild swing and connects with Rod's cheek.)

ROD: Now why did you do that?

MADLOCK: We're gonna have to give you some of this too. (Bleek takes a boxing stance and before he can get off one punch, Madlock pops him five quick times square on right in the mouth. Blood and teeth fly everywhere. Bleek flies back like a projectile and lands on top of some garbage cans next to Giant.) ...

[The crowd rushes from the backstage door into the alley.]

(At the end of the alley, Rod and Madlock slowly walk away, never looking back.) ...

(Moe and Josh fight their way through the crowd and look at Giant and Bleek.)

MOE: NOT IN THE MOUTH. NOT IN THE MOUTH. YOU BUSTED HIS MOUTH. YOU BUSTED HIS MOUTH. (Lee 1990:277-8).

Bleek loses more than a battle in an alley, he loses the value of his artistic gift. He is never again to work as a performing artist. Bleek's fate is determined by the depth of his loyalty to his addictively gambling friend, Giant. Giant himself has earlier also fallen prey to the violence which attends his gambling habit. In a sickening scene, "Madlock methodically breaks all of Giant's five fingers on his left hand." (Lee 1990:257-8). The message is that our weak-

nesses lead us to destruction and to the destruction of our loved ones.

The weakness of drug addiction creates the symbiosis between the predatory drug dealer and the hapless junkie. The dealer has a serpentine reputation in the African-American community; menacing, fascinating, treacherous, slick, and above all deadly. Gator's weakness in *Jungle Fever* leads to a death made the more tragic because his father is the executioner. Sam Jackson's portrayal and Spike Lee's direction reveal the descending way-stations in the degrading spiral of the junkie's career. We are amused, we are horrified, we are immersed in the den of iniquity.

Spike comments broadly and boldly on the divisive issue of skin color as it affects the minds and lives of African-Americans. In *School Daze* the issue assumes tribalistic proportions.

(The Gamma Rays come out of a lounge into a corridor where Rachel, Doris, Lizzie, and some other female Jig[aboo]s are sitting. Everyone becomes quiet as the two factions, Wannabee and Jig, meet. Jane takes the lead and the Gamma Rays step over the Jigs, who are still sitting down. Jane accidentally, or maybe not, steps on Rachel's hand.)

RACHEL: The word is "excuse me."

JANE: Nobody told you to sit here in the hall either. "Excuse me."

RACHEL: That's better, Miss Thing.

(Jane gives Rachel a long, hard look. She then flips her hair at Rachel and the Gamma Rays follow suit.)

DORIS: It's not real.

DINA: Say what?

LIZZIE: You heard.

(The Jigs stand up and the battle lines are drawn.)

RACHEL: It ain't even real.

JANE: You wish you had hair like this.

DORIS: Girl, y'know you weren't born with green eyes.

LIZZIE: Green contact lenses.

DINA: They're just jealous.

RACHEL: Jealous?

JANE: Rachel, I've been watching you look at Julian. You're not slick.

RACHEL: If that was true he's not much to look at.

JANE: Pickaninny.

DORIS: Barbie doll.

RACHEL: High-yellow heifer.

DINA: Tar Baby!

VIVIAN: Wanna Be White!

KIM: Jigaboo!

RACHEL: Don't start.

JANE: We're gonna finish it.

[Musical production number] (Lee 1988:220-1).

The Jigaboos and Wannabees are mobilized against one another while they ignore a common heritage. As African-Americans they suffer because their misguided focus allows the perpetuation of social inequities. As women they suffer because they lack a unified and shared understanding of their subdominant status vis-à-vis males.

In *Jungle Fever* both Flipper and Drew are haunted by childhood memories of taunts received because of a skin color that was said to be too light or too dark. The women's "war council" dwells on and revolves around the topic of complexion. The issue of skin color as a divisive irritant within the African-American population is an issue that will not be wished away or denied. In fact, possibly the best prospect for a solution is technological: a report from Arizona tells of research on Melanotan, a compound which can increase the production of melanin and permanently darken skin (Freundlich 1989). The research is at the stage of animal trials. Help is on the way—for those who truly want it.

The rest of Spike's representations of intragroup conflict are the cussings and scuffling that are too often seen as merely cultural. Spike Lee is bent on cultural change; his motive is as much to teach as to entertain.

Tranquility is a Sometimes Thing

In reflecting on these themes in Spike Lee's films one cannot help but be struck by the fact that they constitute a catalogue of misery, treachery, and deceit. Are we choosing to take the narrow, pessimistic view? Have we ignored the scenes of happiness and contentment, and chosen to dwell instead on the deviance and violence? Admittedly there is joy in Spike's magic lantern. Nola's birthday fete in *She's Gotta Have It* is a creative tribute concocted by

Jamie, the devoted lover.

JAMIE: Now you can open your eyes.

(When Nola opens her eyes we pull back and see we are no longer in her loft but in FORT GREENE PARK in downtown Brooklyn. At the top of the park is a hundred-foot-tall monument. Draped around it are balloons and a big banner that says HAPPY BIRTHDAY NOLA.) ...

(Jamie hits the play button on a ghetto blaster and the music starts. ... "Nola's Theme"..., sung by a soaring male voice.)

(ANGLE—DANCERS)

(The graceful dance is narrative. A story being told. It is based loosely on the relationship between Nola and Jamie. Faith, the dancer, does suggestive movements (pelvic thrusts, hip swivels, etc.) all over and around Noble, the dancer, who couldn't care less. He's not studying her. Nonetheless, we're dealing with a persistent lady here, she knows what she's doing. When he can't stand it anymore and desires her she splits. Two other male dancers appear and she starts in on them. A fight breaks out and Noble...wins her back. They make love and he falls asleep. Faith...sneaks out under the cover of darkness to rendezvous with those two men and is back before he awakens. They make love again then walk off arm in arm.)

(ANGLE—NOLA and JAMIE)

(Nola is happy as a lark. She applauds.)

NOLA: This is the sweetest birthday I've ever had. ... (Lee 1987:310).

Spike frames it as a special moment by rendering the scene in color.

School Daze has moments of festivity and tenderness amidst scenes of inter-group rivalry and sexual exploitation.

(A banner hangs above the gymnasium: "HOMECOMING SPLASH JAM." A MOB IS AT THE ENTRANCE TRYING TO GET IN.)

(ANGLE—DOOR)

(At the door are Grady, Jordan, Booker T., Monroe, and Edge. All are wearing trenchcoats. A person in front of them is arguing, which is holding up the line.)

BOOKER T.: Yo, in or out, what's it gonna be?

STUDENT [TAKING TICKETS]: I don't care what you say.

(The [arguer] walks away, grumbling. The Fellas flash open their trenchcoats and the STUDENT looks them over and waves them on through.) ...

[Inside the gym] ...

(...Each [of the Fellas] is wearing bikini trunks and sneakers. They begin to flex their oiled, well-defined muscles for the benefit of the ladies. ...)

(...[There is] a whole gym packed with [ladies] geared in one- and two-piece bathing suits. ...)

[On stage]

BUCKWHEAT: The Splash Jam, all right. We're gonna turn this mutha out. ...

I'm gonna bring on the hottest go-go band in the land, that D.C. funk. Here to introduce the dance sensation across the nation—DA BUTT. Put your hands together...

(The live band kicks off a jam and the gym rocks.) (Lee 1988:306-8).

The Splash Jam is an unqualified gala, enjoyed with wild abandon by all factions of the college student bodies (sic). The film has other celebrations, however, that are marred by the intergroup conflicts that infest the small campus.

[The GREEK SHOW]

(A Greek show is an event where each fraternity does its steps, its marches. Each step is accompanied by a song or a rap boasting about the uniqueness of the particular fraternity. Almost all in particular are about sexual prowess. This is what attracts the females. Even though the gestures and language are 'nasty,' every time there is a Greek show the females will be there.) ...

(WE SEE Alpha Phi Alpha do the 'Alpha Train.' Kappa Alpha Psi does 'He Was a Gladiator, He Was Glad He Ate Her.' ... Omega Psi Phi...has a nationwide rep as the nastiest of the nasty. Their classics are 'Ah Tit-Tit' (they run into the audience at the end of the song, squeezing young, plump, firm breasts) and the ultimate showstopper, 'Pass da Pussy Please.' You've got to see this one to believe it.)

(Finally the Gammas take the stage. They all wear black capes and masks

à la Zorro.)

(ANGLE—CROWD)

(WE SEE Slice and the Fellas move in and out of the crowd. Something is going on.)

(ANGLE—GAMMAS)

(The Gammas are stepping, Julian is getting off. They finish and the crowd applauds. When we hear...)

FELLAS: Brothers, march.

(The crowd makes an opening for [the Fellas]. They step into the circle doing a very exaggerated mockery of a frat step. The Gammas are furious as the crowd roars with laughter. The Fellas are shouting.)

FELLAS (cont'd): Daddy Long Stroke, 000,000.

Daddy Long Stroke, 000,000.

Daddy Long Stroke, 000,000.

SLICE: Brothers, halt.

FELLAS: Shoot the juice, shoot the juice, shoot, shoot, shoot the juice.

(By now the crowd is screaming. The Fellas have succeeded in making total fools out of the Greeks, especially the Gammas, who stand there completely embarrassed.) (Lee 1988:282-3).

The marriage between Bleek and Indigo marks a happy ending to *Mo' Betta Blues*, as does the final scene between Da Mayor and Mother Sister in *Do the Right Thing*.

(MOTHER SISTER'S BEDROOM—DAY)

(Da Mayor wakes up in Mother Sister's big brass bed (she was born in it).

At first he has no idea where he's at, then he sees Mother Sister sitting down across the room smiling at him.)

MOTHER SISTER: Good morning.

DA MAYOR: Is it a good morning?

MOTHER SISTER: Yes indeed. You almost got yourself killed last night.

DA MAYOR: I've done that before.

(Da Mayor gets up out of her big brass bed.)

DA MAYOR: Where did you sleep?

MOTHER SISTER: I didn't.

DA MAYOR: I hope the block is still standing.

MOTHER SISTER: We're still standing. (Lee 1989:258-9).

The opening scene of family life in the Purify household contains most of the tranquillity to be found in *Jungle Fever*. Tranquillity there is in Spike Lee's films, but mostly it is a sometimes thing.

Spike Lee seems to be a man mobilized by the clear and present danger to the African-American social environment. He insists that we wake up and face the danger. And, he will not cease in warning us of the enemy within and without.

In addition, there is a subtext in Spike Lee's work concerning the fleeting nature of life and its events. His treatment of the pleasures we derive from our existence, the products we create during our lives, and the relationships we form often emphasize the transitoriness of the things we most enjoy and esteem. In *Jungle Fever* the carnal pleasures of romance lead directly to trouble. By contrast, Nola in *She's Gotta Have It* exuberantly revels in her sexual liberation. But, as the tale ends she makes a decision for self-imposed celibacy, however briefly it is enacted. Her contemplation of change from a life of worldly pleasure to the life of a nun is almost Buddhist in its presentation. The soporific pleasure of narcotics leads to depravity and death in *Jungle Fever* and the hedonistic addiction to gambling leads to pain and destruction in *Mo' Betta Blues*. Even the comforting pleasures of spiritual life enjoyed by the Good Reverend Doctor are wrenched and buffeted by an ugly reality in *Jungle Fever*.

Flipper's work is devalued by his bosses in *Jungle Fever*. Adding destruction to insult, his wife, in a fit of righteous rage, defenestrates all of his architectural drawings and equipment. Sal's pizza parlor in *Do the Right Thing* is reduced to a burnt out hulk in the space of a few minutes of violence, the violence triggered by Sal's fit of pique. In *Mo' Betta Blues*, Bleek is stripped of his musical artistry in a back alley brawl. Finally, the gala productions of the students in *School Daze* consist solely of ephemera—floats, costumes, dance routines; none of these will outlive even the mayfly.

Relationships in Spike Lee's films can spontaneously destruct. The elusive Nola is plainly not the woman who wants your engagement ring. In *School Daze* even the seemingly durable relationship between Dap and Rachel, fired in the crucible of activism, cannot withstand the misunderstanding and slights that tarnish its luster. There is a contrary observation to be seen in *Do the Right*

Thing; the Mayor and Mother Sister find common ground amidst the turmoil of the neighborhood. The multiple romances of Bleek in *Mo' Betta Blues* are clearly destined for disaster; we see this plainly from the outset. Finally, *Jungle Fever* presents us with a panorama of tenuous relationships. We can imagine further turmoil that is likely to occur in the collective lives of these characters after the curtain falls.

Coda

Spike Lee's art is an art of advocacy. He is speaking in favor of the need for African-American solidarity. In his titles and credits he is seen to juxtapose the images and ideas of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. By doing so he demonstrates to us that supposedly antagonistic factions in African-American society have much in common. Through unity there is a viable society to be gained, through conflict there is a people to be lost.