FILM REVIEW

Film Noir

Michael Eric Dyson

In 1986, a distinct phase in contemporary African-American cinema commenced. Spike Lee wrote, produced, directed, and acted in *She's Gotta Have It,* an independently made sex comedy that cost $175,000 but grossed over $6 million after distribution by Island Pictures. Since then Lee, and an expanding cadre of Black filmmakers, including Robert Townsend, Keenen Ivory Wayans, and Euzhan Palcy, have written and directed a number of films that explore various themes in Black life. Lee in particular creates films that are part of a revival of Black nationalism (neonationalism), a movement that includes provocative expressions in the cultural sphere (elements of rap music, the wearing of African medallions), interesting interventions in the intellectual sphere (articulations of Afrocentric perspectives in academic disciplines), and controversial developments in the social sphere (symbolized by Louis Farrakhan's "Nation of Islam" ideology, which enjoys narrow but significant popularity among Blacks). Lee, foremost among his Black director peers, is concerned with depicting the sociopolitical implications of his Afrocentric film aesthetic and neonationalist worldview.

But he is also determined to display the humanity of his characters, and he insists upon exploring the unacknowledged diversity and the jarring and underappreciated contradictions of Black life. Lee, however, is confronted with a conflict: how to present the humanity of Black folk without lapsing into an ontology of race that structures simplistic categories of being for Black people and Black culture that are the worst remnants of old-style Black nationalism. Such constructions of Black character and culture fail to express the complex diversity of Black humanity.

On the one hand, because Lee is apparently committed to a static conception of racial identity, his characters appear as products of an archetypal mold that predetermines their responses to a range of sociohistorical situations. These characters are highly symbolic and widely representative, reflecting Lee's determination to repel the folkloric symbols of racism through racial countersymbol. On the other hand, Lee must revise his understanding of racial identity in order to present the humanity of Black characters successfully. He must permit his characters to possess irony, self-reflection, and variability, qualities that, when absent—no matter the high aims that underlie archetypal representation—necessarily circumscribe agency and flatten humanity. It is in the electric intersection of these two competing and at times contradictory claims, of Black cultural neonationalism and Black humanism, that Lee's art takes place.

In *Do the Right Thing,* Lee's Black neonationalism leaps off the screen through brilliant cinematography and riveting messages. As most Americans know, *Do the Right Thing* is about contemporary racism. The film's action is concentrated in a single block of Brooklyn's "Bed-Stuy" neighborhood on a scorching summer day. The heat, both natural and social, is a central metaphor for the film's theme of tense race relations. The pivotal place of social exchange in this compact, ethnically diverse, and highly self-contained community is Sal's Famous Pizzeria, the single vestige of white-owned business in "Bed-Stuy." Sal (Danny Aiello) owns and operates the restaurant along with his two sons, Pino (John Turturro) and Vito (Richard Edson), proud Italians who make the daily commute from the suburb of Bensonhurst. Lee plays Mookie, the hardworking but responsibility-shirking delivery man for Sal's, and the primary link between the community and the pizzeria. Mookie seems able to maneuver easily between worlds—until late in the film, when the community erupts in a riot at Sal's, prompted by an egregious instance of police brutality.

In choosing to explore the racial tension between Italian-Americans and African-Americans, Lee makes explicit reference to Howard Beach, employing it as an ideologically charged conceptual foil for his drama about American racism. Lee makes allusions to the Howard Beach incident throughout the movie: Sal brandishes a baseball bat in conflicts with various Black patrons; the crowd chants "Coward Beach" at the riot. Lee wants his movie to provoke discussion about racism in the midst of a racially repressive era, when all such discourse is either banished to academia (though not much discussion goes on there either) or considered completed in the distant past. Lee rejects the premises of this Reagan-era illogic and goes straight to the heart of the mechanism that disseminates and reinforces racial repression: the image, the symbol, the representation. *Do the Right Thing* contains symbols of racism and resistance to racism, representations of Black life, and images of Black nationalist sensibilities and thought.

Lee creates symbols that reveal the remorseless persistence of racism in quotidian quantity, exposing the psychopathology of everyday racism as it accumulates in small doses, over the course of days not unlike the one we witness in *Do the Right Thing.* Lee shows us the little bruises, the minor frustrations, and the minute but myriad racial fractures that mount without healing. There is the riff of the prickly relations between the Black residents and the Koreans who own

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the neighborhood market. There is the challenge of Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn), a menacing bundle of brawn who wields his boom box as a weapon to usurp communal aural space as he practices his politics of cultural terrorism. But the central symbol of racial conflict is the ongoing tiff between Buggin' Out and Sal over the latter's refusal to place photos of Black people on Sal's Wall of Fame, reserved for the likes of DiMaggio, Stallone, and Sinatra. Sal and Buggin' Out's battle over the photographs, over the issue of *representing* Black people, makes explicit the terms of the film's representational warfare.

Lee's decision to provoke discussion about racism is heroic. He exposes a crucial American failure of nerve, a stunning loss of conscience about race. But beyond this accomplishment, how much light does he shed by raising the question of racism in the manner that he does? Lee's perspective portrays a view of race and racism that, while it manages to avoid a facile Manichaeanism, nevertheless slides dangerously close to a vision of "us" and "them," in which race is seen solely through the lens of biological determinism.

The problem with such biological determinism is that it construes racial identity as a unidimensional, monocausal reality that can be reduced to physically inheritable characteristics. Racial identity is an ever-evolving, continually transforming process that is never fully or finally exhausted by genetics and physiology. It is constantly structured and restructured, perennially created and re-created, in a web of social practices, economic conditions, gendered relations, material realities, and historical situations that are themselves shaped and reshaped. As the feminist critique of Freud asserts, anatomy is not destiny; likewise, biology is not identity.

Black cultural neonationalism obscures the role of elements such as gender, class, and geography in the construction of racial identity, and by so doing limits its resources for combating racial oppression. Consider the film's end, in which Lee juxtaposes quotes from Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X which posit the harm versus the help of violence in aid of Black liberation. Lee has not stumbled serendipitously toward an interpretive framework that summarizes the two options open to Black folk in fighting racism: Lee's neonationalist perspective has regulated his presentation of the problem of racism in the movie all along.

Furthermore, Lee's neonationalism determines which quotes he uses. As Lee knows, it can be argued that, before their deaths, King and X were converging in their understanding of race and racism. Both of them were developing an understanding of racial identity and racism that was much more complex, open-ended, ecumenical, and international than the one they had previously. King was changing because of his more radical comprehension of the relationship between race and class, and thus began to promote a more aggressive version of nonviolent resistance. X was changing, too, because of his visit to Mecca and his expanding conception of the possibilities of interracial solidarity. Each man also borrowed elements of analysis from the other, appropriating those lessons in ways that had the potential to chart a much different path for resistance to oppression in the seventies and on. By using these quotes from King and X, free of context, Lee gives an anachronistic and ahistorical reading of the two figures. Presenting these quotes as a basis of present options may provide some conceptual and emotive resources for debate, but does little to enlighten. Lee freezes the meanings of these two men, instead of utilizing their mature thought as a basis for *reconceiving* the problem of racism to address *our* particular set of historical circumstances.

Lee's neonationalist leanings also affect his characters, who become mere archetypes. Buggin' Out (Giancarlo Esposito) is the local radical, a caricature of deep commitment, who is more rabble-rouser than thoughtful insurgent. Smiley (Roger Guenveur Smith) is the stuttering conscience, first seen in front of the Yes Jesus Can Baptist Church. He hawks photographs of the famous meeting between King and X to reluctant passersby. Ossie Davis plays Da Mayor, the neighborhood drunk, who represents older Black men who were scathed by economic desperation and personal failure, and whose modus vivendi is shaped by the bottle. Ruby Dee (Davis's real-life wife) is Mother Sister, a lonely Black woman who represents the neighborhood's omniscient eye. She is a possible victim of desertion by a man like Da Mayor, or a woman who was determined and independent before her time (or perhaps both). Joie Lee, Spike's real-life sister, plays Mookie's sister Jade, and represents the responsible and stable Black woman. She must support and suffer Mookie, her affectionately irascible brother, whom she chides for not taking care of his son. Mookie's son's mother, Tina (Rosie Perez), is the Latin firebrand who extemporizes in colorful neologism about Mookie's domestic shortcomings. And a trio of middle-aged Black men, Sweet Dick Willie, ML, and Coconut Sid (Robin Harris, Paul Benjamin, and Frankie Faison), represent the often humorous folk philosophy of a generation of Black males who have witnessed the opening of socioeconomic opportunity for others, but who must cope with a more limited horizon for themselves.

In one respect, Lee's use of archetypal Black figures is salutary, as it expands the register of Black characters in contemporary cinema. But the larger effect is harmful, and is a measure both of Hollywood's deeply entrenched racism and of the limitation of Lee's neonationalist worldview. Lee follows a tradition of sorts, as the attempt to decenter prevalent conceptions of racial behavior began in earnest in the twenties in Oscar Micheaux's films. A much later attempt to shift from stereotype to archetype in Black film was crudely rendered in Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971). Although Lee is light-years ahead of Van Peebles in most respects, he still adopts a crucial element of Van Peebles's work: the representative archetype.

Lee is unable to meld his two ambitions—to present the breadth of Black humanity while proclaiming a Black neonationalist aesthetic. His attempt to present a Black universe is admirable, but that universe must be one in which people genuinely act and do not simply respond as mere archetypal constructions. Because the characters carry such weighty symbolic significance (resonant though it might be), they must act like symbols, not like humans. As a result, their story seems predetermined, a by-product of a complicated configuration of social, personal, and political situations.

The archetypal model accounts for the manner in which Lee portrays the

white characters, particularly Sal and sons. Pino is the vicious ethnic chauvinist who clings tightly to his Italian identity and heritage for fear of finding himself awash in the tide of "nigger"-loving that seems to soak his other family members. Vito is the ethnic pluralist, an easygoing and impressionable young man whose main distinction is that he has no major beef with the Blacks and Puerto Ricans. Only Sal, who splits the difference between his two sons, manages to rise to some complexity. He is a proud businessman whose longstanding relationship with the community has endeared him to most of the neighborhood's residents. But when provoked, he is not above hurling the incendiary racial epithet, which on one fateful occasion seals his destiny by beginning the riot that destroys his store.

This Saturday night Sal keeps the store open late to accommodate a group of neighborhood kids. That is when Radio Raheem (boom box in tow and pumping loud) and Buggin' Out shout a final request to place photos of Blacks on the wall. After Radio Raheem refuses to lower the volume of his box, Sal, driven to an understandable frenzy, crushes the radio with his baseball bat. Radio Raheem also behaves understandably. He grabs Sal, pulls him over the counter, and the two men struggle from the store into the street. The police arrive and attempt to restrain Radio Raheem using the infamous New York Police "chokehold," a potentially lethal technique, especially when applied to Black male necks. The police let Radio Raheem drop dead to the ground, kick him, and drag him into a police car. Meanwhile, they have handcuffed Buggin' Out and carted him away. The crowd is horror-stricken. Mookie, until now the mediator of disputes between Sal and the community, takes sides with his neighbors and throws a trash can through Sal's window, catalyzing the riot. The crowd destroys the pizzeria, overturning tables and equipment and taking money from the cash register. But it is stuttering Smiley who starts the fire. In African-American religious tradition, the Holy Spirit appears before believers in the form of fire. Smiley's torch is the articulation of his religious passion.

Lee's portrayal of police brutality, which has claimed the lives of too many Black people, is disturbingly honest. The encounter between Radio Raheem and Sal is poignant and instructive. It shows that a Black person's death may be provoked by incidents of racial antagonism gone amok, and that it is easy for precious young Black life to be sacrificed in the gritty interstices between anger and abandonment. Thus, we can understand the neighborhood's consuming desire to destroy property—avenging the murder of a son whose punishment does not fit his crime.

It is also understandable that the crowd destroys Sal's place, the pizzeria being the nearest representative of destructive white presence, a white presence that has just denied Radio Raheem his future. But Sal certainly doesn't represent the "powers" that Public Enemy rapped about so fearlessly on Radio Raheem's box. As Lee knows, the character of racism has changed profoundly in the last few decades, and even though there are still too many ugly reassertions of overt racism, it is often the more subtle variety that needs to be identified and fought.

For instance, after viewing Lee's film many people may leave the theater smugly self-confident that they are not racists because they are not petty-bourgeois Italian businessmen, because they don't call people niggers, and because they are not policemen who chokehold Black men to death. But contemporary racism is often the teacher who cannot take a Black student seriously, who subtly dismisses her remarks in class because they are "not really central," or because he has presumed, often unconsciously, a limit to her abstract reasoning. (The double whammy of race and gender operate here.) Contemporary racism is often middle-level Black managers hitting a career ceiling that is ostensibly due to their lack of high-level management skills, which, of course, are missing not because of lack of intelligence but because they have not acquired the right *kinds* of experience. Contemporary racism is not about being kept out of a clothes store, but rather about not being taken seriously because the store clerk presumes you won't spend your money, or that you have none to spend.

To assert that racism is most virulent at Sal's level misses the complex ways in which everyday racism is structured, produced, and sustained in multifarious social practices, cultural traditions, and intellectual justifications. Sal is as much a victim of his racist worldview as he is its perpetrator. By refusing to probe the shift in the modus operandi of American racism, Lee misses the opportunity to expose what the British cultural critic Stuart Hall calls inferential racism, the "apparently naturalized representation of events and situations relating to race, whether factual or 'fictional,' which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of unquestioned assumptions."

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Those who strive to resist the new-style racism must dedicate themselves to pointing out slippery attitudes and ambiguous actions that signal the presence of racism without appearing to do so. This strategy must include drawing attention to unintended racist statements, actions, and thoughts, which nevertheless do harm. These strategies must be accompanied by sophisticated, high-powered intellectual dialogue about how the nature of particular forms of Western discourse provide the expression, reproduction, and maintenance of racist ideology and practices. People must form interracial, international lines of solidarity and develop analyses of racism in tandem with similar analyses of sexism, classism, anti-Semitism, anti-Arabism, homophobia, ecological terrorism, and a host of other progressive concerns.

Perhaps nothing does more to symbolize the shadowed brilliance of Lee's project, the troubled symbiosis of his Black neonationalist vision and his desire to represent Black humanity, than a scene in which Mookie is completing an argument with Jade. After they depart, the camera fixes on the graffiti on the wall: "Tawana told the truth!" It is understandable, given Lee's

perspective, that he chooses to retrieve this fresh and tortured signifier from the iconographical reservoir of Black neonationalists, some of whom believe Tawana transcends her infamous circumstances and embodies the reality of racial violence in our times. Racial violence on every level is vicious now, but Tawana is not its best or most powerful symbol. Lee's invocation of Tawana captures the way in which many positive aspects of neonationalist thought are damaged by close association with ideas and symbols that hurt more than help. Yes, it is important to urge racial self-esteem, a vision for racial progress, the honoring of historical figures, and the creation of powerful culture, but not if the result is a new kind of bigotry. For this reason we must criticize Lee's proximity to Louis Farrakhan's ideological stances. Real transformation of our condition will come only as we explore the resources of progressive thought, social action, and cultural expression that were provided by figures like King, X, Paul Robeson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Lorraine Hansberry, Pauli Murray, and Ida B. Wells. But we can't wallow in unimaginative mimesis. These people's crucial insights, cultural expressions, and transformative activities must inspire us to think critically and imaginatively about our condition, and help us generate profound and sophisticated responses to our own crises. Only then will we be able to do the right thing. □

FILM REVIEW

Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade: Serial Mythmash

Harvey R. Greenberg

Steven Spielberg desperately wants to recreate ancient legends for enjoyment at the local sixplex. *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* is the third installment of the wildly successful series about the indefatigable archaeologist Indiana Jones, and is Spielberg's latest attempt at Sunset Boulevard mythopoesis. Armed with courage, American know-how, and a bullwhip, Indy once again saves a revered icon of Western culture from despicable foreign plunderers. Spielberg wants Indy to appear as a bigger-than-life reinvention of a matinee serial hero from the forties, acting out a saga with overtones of Homeric, Oedipal, and Arthurian legend. Unfortunately, the director's special-effects wizardry cannot sustain the myth of Indy. Instead, Spielberg has produced a mythmash of exotic scenery, furious chases, and one-dimensional characters.

Like *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom, The Last Crusade* is a "prequel" to *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. A past has been invented for our hero, centered around Indy's chronic estrangement from his curmudgeon father. Professor Henry Jones's competitive and disapproving demeanor is briefly established during early scenes from Indy's adolescence. The father is revealed as a noted medievalist with a lifelong obsession with the Holy Grail. His wife died young, and he was so consumed with work, so neglectful and critical of Indy, that the boy left home at an early age.

The action flashes forward to 1938. A grown-up Indy returns from his latest perilous escapade to resume a quiet academic life. His first class is hardly over when an American tycoon (who turns out to be in secret league with the Nazis) commissions Indy to find the Grail. The tycoon says that he previously enlisted Indy's father for the same purpose after hearing that Professor Jones had discovered new evidence in Venice proving the Grail's existence. At first, Indy truculently resists becoming involved with his father's monomaniacal quest. Then he learns that the professor has mysteriously vanished. Indy receives the professor's notebooks in the mail, apparently posted on the brink of his disappearance. Using the notebooks to complete Jones's Venetian research, Indy discovers that during the Crusades the Grail was hidden away in a mountain stronghold deep within Arabia Deserta.

Indy traces his father to an Austrian castle, where the Waffen SS has imprisoned him. The two escape, journey across Europe into the Middle East, and air their grievances as they fight off the pursuing Hun from motorcycle, zeppelin, airplane, and horseback. The chilly relationship between father and son gradually thaws. Professor Jones realizes the depth of his long-disavowed affection when he mistakenly believes Indy has been killed.

Good and Evil questors finally meet in the caverns of the desert peak. Indy survives a gauntlet of deadly challenges and enters the chamber where the Grail is enshrined, guarded by the same knight who placed it there centuries ago. The Nazis and their minions perish, but not before Professor Jones is mortally wounded. Indy uses the Grail's power to save his father, then returns the Grail to eternal rest with its chivalrous keeper. *The Last Crusade* ends with Jones Senior and Junior literally riding off into the sunset.

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