

Do the right thing –
an analysis on theme
essay



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“ Do the right thing” is a serious social commentary brought to screen by the ever controversial and confrontational writer/director/actor, Spike Lee. The film’s title hints toward the fact that it will address certain issues. Indeed, the movie is very thematic in its content and the hot oppressive downtown Brooklyn feuds, ever present in this movie serve as symbolic reminders of the many liberation struggles fought before today. This essay aims to break down “ Do the right thing” assessing what its major theme is and how this is communicated through dialogue as well as the directors’ use of mise-en-scene, montage and music.

The opening credit sequence is that of a girl performing a modern dance routine to a contemporary – for the eighties – song with the chorus echoing, “ fight the powers that be”. The girls’ dancing comes across as almost angry. It is definitely not graceful or delicate; and the mood her actions portray are much enhanced by the use of disharmonious jump cuts. This intro sets a definite tone for the movie and gives us the viewer an intriguing taste as to what themes the film will explore and confront.

The film is a slice of life movie, revolving around the lives of the inhabitants of a downtown Brooklyn neighbourhood and how they interact with each other in the cultural mixing pot that is their environment. One of the major characters of the movie, the one who it could be argued represents the antagonistic element, is the incredibly hot and oppressive weather. Spike lee, portrays beautifully the agony experienced by all the inhabitants, at the hands of the heat. The colours are very rich and bright, the people all carry themselves as though it’s too hot to breath, the cooling water and persistence of fans bring the screen to life. Indeed the screen itself seems to steam.

In my opinion the major theme the film explores is questioning the nature of conflict as a viable means to resisting oppression. Having said that, I feel it is important to view the movie as an analogy for either the American civil rights movement or the liberation struggle against apartheid fought here in S. A. In this light the symbols in the movie, through which the filmmaker explores the films themes become evident.

The hot oppressive heat, which the movies inhabitants have to contend with symbolises the laws (sticking to the apartheid analogy), which bound and dehumanised the blacks.

Another important symbol that fuels this theme is the role of music in the film, i. e. not only the score, but also the actual environmental music. The one character, throughout the duration of the film walks around with a boom box. And it is almost in his wake that some of the worst conflict in the movie occurs. The only song he plays is the pertinent intro song, shouting, “ Fight the power”. His first run in is with some Latino looking guys. This conflict is somewhat peaceful as they merely compete to see whose sound system can go the loudest. Later in the movie, at Sal’s, the local pizzeria, the boom box character is ordered to turn down his music.

He refuses and as a result Sal gets increasingly enraged till he eventually smashes the boom box. Pausing there quickly, I feel in the movie, music equals expression. Indeed in South Africa, people found music as a medium to express their sorrows and to bind themselves within a sense of nationality. As within Sal’s, music leads to conflict, therefore expression leads to conflict,

for indeed what is oppression save hindering an individual or indeed race's ability to freely express themselves.

The conflict in the movie is not only reserved for extra-racial activities, rather a lot of the worst conflict is that of brother on brother, inter family feuds, and fighting amongst members of the same race. Lee explores this avenue to show the hypocrisy to prevalent amongst " liberation activists". No sooner will a character criticise the member of the opposite race, than they will go home and fight amongst themselves. As the two Italian brothers do, or Lee's characters wife, with her mother. In a blatant act of hypocrisy, Lee's character, Mookey tells one of the Italian brothers not to take any " shit" from his brother, then in the next breath he shouts at a particularly simple character, Smiley, not to annoy him. Additionally, interracial conflict is seen when the neighbourhood kids fling insults and shouts at the local drunk, demonstrating that prejudice and intolerance are not only reserved for those of opposite races.

Lee employs a lot of cinematic techniques in order to propel his thematic explorations. Very often when the characters are behaving ridiculously, i. e. demonstrating some form of abstract prejudice, they are framed in an oblique angle. This demonstrates the disharmonious nature of whatever scenario is unfolding. At times, extreme wide-angle shots are used. This adds a somewhat disproportionate and disjointing feel to the movie. Sticking with the directors' employment of mise en scene is his manipulation and use of colour. The angry, yet somewhat comical three old characters that are always just sitting around, do so under a shockingly red wall. They are almost like the flies on the wall, watching everything but offering no real

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solution. The red might be indicative of their internal anger, or perhaps it is the wall itself, i. e. the environment, the country which is angry at them for their complacency. In one such shot there is a stark contrast between the colour of their skins on the red of the wall. Perhaps Lee is making us aware of our ever present judgements based solely on colour.

There are a number of montage scenes in the movie. When the people are spraying around with the water pump, to cool of. Then when the symbolic riots occur, the scene is cut in montage, doubling up with frequent and clever use of oblique angles. It is interesting to note that in the riots, the police use water guns as crowd control. This is ironic as it was the water, which they so fervently sought out. This might be a symbol representing the fact that that which we perceive to be an ally, might turn out to be our downfall.

Do the right thing is very characteristically a Spike Lee film. It is confrontational, it doesn't shy away from controversial subject matter and he forces us to think about the very nature of that which we either take for granted or chose not to give much energy to. The theme's of conflict and prejudice are extensively explored in this film. From character dialogue, to shot composition to editing techniques, much energy is put into exploring these themes. In my opinion, this exploration is somewhat transparent, i. e. unsubtle. It could almost appear that the film was created simply to house these themes.

Which is alright, but the film tends to lack certain other much needed qualities, such as characterisation, character development, logical plot and

story development, etc. Nonetheless the film gets across the message the filmmaker intended us to get. As Samuel L Jackson's smooth velvety voice echoes out with the information that it will be another hot day, we are forced to examine our own behaviour, and are left thinking what the chances are of such a scenario developing in our own lives and what the best way would be to avoid letting that happening.