

## SPIKE LEE: PROTEST, LITERARY TRADITION, AND THE INDIVIDUAL FILMMAKER

*Sanford Pinsker*  
*Franklin and Marshall College*

«The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended».

James Baldwin

Writing in the pages of *Partisan Review* some forty years ago James Baldwin set out to boldly link Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and to announce his separate, aesthetic peace from both. He called his essay «Everybody's Protest Novel», making it clear that the «everybody» did not include *him*:

...unless one's ideal of society is race of neatly analyzed, hard-working ciphers, one can hardly claim for the protest novels the lofty purpose they claim for themselves or share the present optimism concerning them. They emerge for what they are: a mirror of our confusion, dishonesty, panic, trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American dream.

That Baldwin's recent death became an occasion for black writers to celebrate his contributions to American letters —and most particularly to the essay— is understandable, but like so many occasions of this stripe, remembering Baldwin also provided a platform by which the words of a safely dead writer could become modified in the guts of the disgruntled. And too often what the memories of Baldwin came down to was this: he never received a Pulitzer Prize. No matter that Baldwin hardly suffered for publishers or a reading public, both of whom supported him through a range of work that swung wildly from the brilliant to the

cloyingly sentimental, from the tough-minded to the merely posturing; no matter that his deepest conflicts had little, if anything, to do with recognition, with «prizes» won, lost, or as some imagined, conspiratorially withheld. What mattered for more than it should have is that he never received a Pulitzer, and moreover that *no* black writer—not Richard Wright, not Langston Hughes, not Ralph Ellison—had ever received one.

Fortunately, *that* affront to the black community could be corrected with Toni Morrison. She had been nominated for her novel, *Beloved*, and one of the tangible results of the eulogies and tears shed for Baldwin was a sharply worded manifesto by a group of forty-eight black artists urging that Morrison be given the long-elusive prize—as a tribute to her work, but more important, as restitution for the long history of ignoring black fiction. The document was less convincing as an exercise in logic than it was as yet another all too familiar instance of cultural blackmail. Nonetheless, it «worked»—at least for those who define success in terms of prizes and the names inscribed upon them. Morrison received a Pulitzer and did what she could to repair the damage done on behalf of pushing *Beloved's* literary stock.

I shall return to Baldwin's words in due time, but I mention him now because what he said so many years ago about the protest novel continues to divide those with an attraction to sociology from those with an allegiance to Art. Now, of course, novels and novelists matter much less than they used to, and the real action, we are told, swirls around matters of critical theory and squabbles about canonicity. Elbowing this or that writer into the canon—as if cultural politics alone could determine the issue—and more important, making sure that these additions are duly represented in reading lists and syllabi—has become something of a full-time professional occupation, with little energy left over to consider the ways that the imagination might liberate readers from the narrow categories of gender, race, and class. Besides, talk about «empowerment» and «privileging» is more bracing than actually *reading* the books so hotly debated on academic panels and in the tortured prose of academic print.

Meanwhile, for most students a required reading remains a required reading, whether it be a sonnet by Shakespeare or one by the Countess of Pembroke, James' *Daisy Miller* or Chopin's *The Awakening*. Granted, a wise, patient, prodding teacher can make students see, and feel, an excitement about great literature—indeed, there was a time when the bulk of English professors would have defined their mission in precisely these ways—but such is no longer the case in our largest, most prestigious universities. One group feels its task to be the bearers of the latest, «good [theoretical] news» from France as modified in the guts of academics from New Haven or Durham; the other spends its time declaring itself on the side of the angels and abusing those not stepping sprightly enough in the forced march toward diversity.

No doubt both sides could make exhaustive cases for the revolutionary nature of their respective enterprises, and it would not surprise me (since nothing does these days) that both would claim that, in a fashion, they teach «protest literature»—the former protesting the «meaning» that literature does not, yea, *cannot*, mean

when it is subjected to even the most rudimentary deconstructionist analysis; the latter insisting that cultural politics, then and now, is the name of the game. Some folks are simply up-front about this, while others keep pretending that something other than Shakespeare's white skin and penis makes his plays worthy of our continued study.

Small wonder that I have been giving thought to what used to be known as a Hobson's choice and the infinite variety it can take on our university campuses. For example, if one had to choose between a second-rate teacher who assigned *Moby-Dick* or a charismatic, extremely popular one with a second-rate syllabus, who would get the nod, and why? Granted, in the best of all possible worlds, our students would study worthy literature taught by worthy professors; but it's not hard to imagine the shouting matches that the word «worthy» would occasion. Indeed, the theoreticians might well argue that while there are certainly worthy *critical* books (e.g., Derrida's *Glas* or Barthes's *S/Z*), where would one find worthy novels, stories, poems, plays! You've got to be kidding! And as for the ideologues, «worthy» is one of those cultural-bound, elitist words that make them boil over with indignation.

In a recent collection entitled *Mazes*, Hugh Kenner likens reading poststructural tomes to jogging with a nail in your shoe. I shall not try to explain, much less to embellish, his metaphor; he is here, as in most things literary, bloody right. But I think it worth pointing out that what provides Kenner fodder for a stinging review is for others—namely, the students of teachers with poststructural passions—another matter altogether. My daughter (a freshman English major at a large, prestigious university) tells me that her tutor thought it might be interesting if the seminar had a chance to read her [unpublished] essay on the «hermeneutics of suspicion». I have my suspicions about that, and while some of them have to do with what now passes as «hermeneutics», most of them center on people who confuse self-indulgence with education.

In short, neither group gives a fig about literature and, not surprisingly, neither is notable for its sense of humor; but if, once again, I had to make a Hobson's choice between those who keep raising the jawbreaker ante as they prattle on about «texts» and those ideologues who, with an eye for cultural conspiracies, I suspect I'd come down in favor of the theoreticians. My daughter's tutor may yet outgrow her passion for the hermeneutics of suspicion, especially when the hem lines change next season. And who knows, maybe she'll retain enough residue from all the hard looks she's given *Jude the Obscure* to one day see it as a novel about what it is like to be dragged kicking-and-screaming into the modern world.

About the ideologues I have fewer hopes. They know a good thing when they have it—not only tenure, but also the giddy feeling that only comes when one is every inch *au courant*. Of such conviction comes rightness, and usually its second cousin, self-righteousness. No doubt they see themselves as part of the «adversary culture», yet how comforting it must be to know that the *zeitgeist* in all its tawdry forms is backing your cause. Every suspicion Orwell ever had about the Big Lie is confirmed as the distinctions between education and propaganda, cultural politics and disinterested judgment, crumble under the relentless attack of

those who believe that everything and everyone is simply an expression of an ideology.

What small hope there is lies in our students who, again and again, may make blunders on the small details but who are likely to see the Big Picture more clearly than their professors. Let me try to put this thunderbolt of a generalization more concretely. In most cases, one instructor's victory on behalf of an expanded canon becomes the used text buyer's easy pickings; and in the case of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s recent edition of Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig*, a student was happy enough to give me his copy free of charge not ten minutes after his seminar on «Racism and the Canon» had concluded. If American protest literature is alive and well, it is likely to be found among the tenured and protected rather than among those hard at work on a novel; and it is more likely to come armed to the teeth in theory than energized by the raw experience that made Dreiser, Dos Passos, and, yes, Richard Wright such important fictionists.

For better or worse, the protest outside academe's insulated walls is the province of rap music, street poets, and not least of all, filmmakers like Spike Lee. Of these phenomena, none has been more debated about, worried over, and lavishly over-praised than Spike Lee's «Do the Right Thing». Not only does it have the look and feel of the «streets», but it also so adroitly combines the ear-jarring insistences of Public Enemy's «Fight the Power» with paeons to the militant philosophy of Malcolm X that it might well be thought of— as Wright's *Native Son* was in its day— as «everybody's protest film».

Yet, even here—in a film designed more with an eye toward self-promotion than to «protest»— the old battle lines that divided Baldwin from Wright and Ellison from Howe remain firmly etched in the concrete of Spike Lee's Brooklyn streets. The difference, of course, is that we have so long been accustomed to feckless Hollywood films and the shoddy language that generally accompany them (the *Sight & Sound* crowd, semioticians all, are an exception, but notable only for those who have forever abandoned clear thought and readable language) that we have forgotten what it was like when intellectuals do polemical battle. In short, most of the fevered reactions to Spike Lee imagine that he is *sui generis*, that his brand of «Protest» has no history. Nothing, in fact, could be further from the truth.

Here, for example, from an article entitled «Black Boys and Native Sons» is Irving Howe, caught in the curious position of defending Wright's clenched-fisted, uncompromising militancy, as he tries to explain—with as much sympathy and eloquence as he can muster— why it is that purely aesthetic considerations must sometimes give way to the urgencies of political realities: «What, then, was the experience of a man with a black skin, what *could* it be in this country? How could a Negro put pen to paper, how could he so much as think or breathe, without some impulsion to protest, be it harsh or mild, political or private, released or buried? The «sociology» of his experience formed a constant pressure on his literary work, and not merely in the way this might be true for any writer, but with a pain and a ferocity that nothing can remove».

Thus, protest literature—like the blues— is the black artist's congenial turf, simultaneously his or her authentic voice and delimiting condition. To his endur-

ing credit, Ellison (then and now) has refused to credential such a vision. Rather, he argues, in «The World and the Jug», —an essay matching Howe's thought for thought, elegant phrase for elegant phrase— that black life in America is *not* an abstraction— the «embodiment of living hell» that those who would champion protest (Wright, Howe, and now, Spike Lee) reduce it to —but, rather, «a *discipline*— just as any human life which has endured so long is a discipline teaching its own strategies of survival. There is a fullness, even a richness here; and here *despite* the realities of politics... perhaps, because it is *human* life... To deny in the interest of revolutionary posture that such possibilities of human richness exist for others... is not only to deny us our humanity but to betray the critic's commitment to social reality».

One wants desperately to keep faith with Ellison's manifesto, to see one's race, ethnic origin, or religion as a significant «part» of a person's identity, point-of-view, essential Self, and yet, somehow, not the whole definition, not *all*; but even in the years (1963-64) when Howe and Ellison conducted their brilliant debate in the pages of *Dissent* and *The New Leader*, there was little enough cause for optimism. Now there is a good deal less, not only in terms of how much more impatience has accumulated over the last twenty-five years or how mob rage has become a staple of television's evening news, but also in terms of how voices of reason on both sides of the racial divide are in such short supply. Nobody need belabor the point that artists of Ellison's calibre are *always* a rarity, but a case can, yea, *must*, be made for artists who share something of his aesthetic commitment, his discipline to both his craft and to the truth, and, perhaps most of all, to a promise of American life more compassionate, more humane, more just than a battle royal conducted with epithets and baseball bats.

I should also mention that, for all their differences, one of the things that Howe and Ellison shared was the same books, the same respect for the suppleness of intellectual debate, the same passion for ideas and the ways that they matter deeply in the quotidian world. This does not mean that either man was thus spared the pangs of conscience that inevitably arise when subsequent events turn even the most brilliant of arguments awry. Howe, for example, has no doubt had occasion to regret the initial enthusiasm that caused him to print Norman Mailer's «The White Negro» (1957) in the pages of *Dissent*. No doubt there are those who would argue that the essay remains a dazzling piece of social criticism/philosophy —Mailer, when he is not a «charmer» or our oldest *enfant terrible* is something of a professional *dazzler*— but my complaint has less to do with how dusty, how intellectually threadbare and pretentious talk about «hipstersdom» seems now, but, rather, with how dangerous, and glibly dangerous at that, the argument was at its very core:

The psychopath murders —if he has the courage— out of the necessary to purge his violence, for if he cannot empty his hatred then he cannot love, his being is frozen with implacable self-hatred for his cowardice. (It can of course be suggested that it takes little courage for two strong eighteen-year-old hoodlums, let us say, to beat in the brains of a candy-store keeper, and indeed the act —even by the logic of the psychopath is not likely to prove very therapeutic, for the

victim is not an immediate equal. Still, courage of a sort is necessary, for one murders not only a weak fifty-year-old man but an institution as well)...

*Courage*, of course, is one of those words that tend to get used in slippery ways, and that give hindsight the whole show. My hunch is that Mailer does not feel the same giddy inclination to wax philosophical—in a mish-mash of Existentialism and half-digested Hemingway—after the Jack Abbot affair; and I feel even more confident that Howe, realizing the high probability that this «fifty-year-old candy store keeper» is Jewish—would not likely give his editorial approval to a similar piece today.

What concerns me, however, is that Spike Lee would have little trouble understanding how it is that murdering an elderly, rather pathetic candy store owner represents «fighting the Power», and how it is that, in Mailer's words, as one «violates private property, one enters into a new relation with the police and introduces a dangerous element into one's life». In all the ink spilled about «Do the Right Thing»—ranging from detailed discussions of cinematographer Ernest Dickerson's use of color and camera angle to speculations about whether or not the film would lead inevitably to urban riots—no reviewer has yet pointed out the «tradition», as it were, in which Spike Lee now numbers himself. For he, like Mailer before him, has an affinity for violence—as dangerous, as defining, as decisive—that has been the special weakness of intellectuals and artists since at least the French Revolution. On this point, Paul Johnson's recent study, *Intellectuals*, is not wrong.

Perhaps now is as good a time as any to introduce a word that crops up all too frequently in academic circles—namely, *privilege*. Used almost exclusively as a verb, along with its second-cousin «privileging», it *signifies* (another fashionable word one runs into at faculty parties) pretty much what Public Enemy means when they rap on about «the Power». Them that's got it, got it, and them that don't, don't. But that much said, it would be hard to think of a filmmaker *more* «privileged» than Spike Lee has been (his family not only footed the bills at N.Y.U.'s film school, but also scraped up the enormous cash necessary to produce his first film—«She's Gotta Have It») and less like the street blacks who provide both his persona and his audience. Nor would it be easy to find a young filmmaker more overpraised than Mr. Lee. Everything about his work—but especially the uncompromising militancy, the stick-it-to-whitey posture in «Do the Right Thing»—brings out superlatives from liberal critics in roughly the same way that the death of Little Eva made Harriet Beecher Stowe's Victorian readers gush. In neither case are the emotions earned; rather they are merely insisted upon.

In Stowe's case at least there are reasons to believe her sincerity, if not to entirely trust her product (she claimed, after all, that God—and not Harriet Beecher Stowe—had really written *Uncle Tom's Cabin*). Spike Lee would hardly make a similar pronouncement. Despite the Power, despite Hollywood's timidity, despite racism itself, *he* prevailed. In a word, it is Spike Lee who is now «privileged». To the victor goeth the spoils: phone calls enthusiastically returned; projects foisted upon him; interviews, photo opportunities, the Whole Works. For a fistful of hard

cash one can buy t-shirts, baseball caps and assorted Spike Lee mementos at «Spike's Joint», his newly-owned emporium in the Brooklyn where his films are shot.

Given the shameful history of Hollywood's treatment of blacks, much of this attention is a just cause for celebration. Spike Lee *does* have talent, and I would be the last one to urge him to be subservient in an industry where funding requires one to be ever more aggressive about box-office appeal and increasingly conventional with regard to one's art. It's not an easy act to balance, and it never was. But when privilege turns out to be an opportunity to make television commercials for Nike sneakers —however interesting or witty they, in fact, are— one has the right to ask if the enemy Spike Lee is so anxious to overthrow is not, in fact, staring back at him from the mirror. Although the word has rather gone out of fashion of late, the term I'm groping for is «co-opted». Granted, the hard cash from Nike—which is no doubt considerable, and no doubt well-earned given Spike Lee's high visibility with young blacks— will allow him to make more films along the lines of «Do the Right Thing». But for those old enough to remember, that argument is remarkably similar to the one university deans used during the late 1960s when they explained that the federal dollars sponsoring «secret research» in the biology department freed up money for new theatre building— and, moreover, that the drama department could put on as many anti-war plays as it wished. The argument didn't wash in their mouths, and its no more compelling in Spike Lee's.

The bald fact, of course, is that Nike's are as much a symbol as they are a product —and here one can cite «Do the Right Thing» itself as Exhibit A. When an uppity white boy (wearing a Celtic's shirt no less) inadvertently tracks his bicycle treads over Buggin' Out's (Giancarlo Esposito) lily white sneakers, the latter's indignation is as comic (credit one point to Mr. Lee) as it is heartfelt. Buggin' Out has what used to be known as a short fuse; he looks for confrontational situations as if it were a full-time occupation. And not surprisingly, he finds them, although in this case, it is Buggin' Out who blinks when the going starts getting tough (another point for Mr. Lee). At this juncture, however, it is hard to tell the Spike Lee who has a sharp eye for satirizing black life (as he clearly, and with something of a mean spirit, does in «School Daze») from the Spike Lee whose commercials for Nike can only make a bad socioeconomic situation worse.

What I'm about to suggest can only make me sound hopelessly old-fashioned, but better that than Spike Lee's cynical hypocrisy. For with «privilege» —if one really must use a word like that— comes responsibility, and it is here that the militant, no-holds-barred Mr. Lee has chosen to fatten his wallet rather than to further his convictions. The immediate losers in all this will be yet another generation of Buggin' Outs who grow up believing that the sun never sets on a man with pristine Mikes, and that hoops, rather than hard academic work, is the way to glide past limitation. But in the long haul we *all* lose —that is, everyone except Spike Lee.

It was Dr. Johnson who first pointed out that patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel, a useful thing to remember when Ollie North's face pops up. But for certain black politicians, racism can work roughly the same magic. And

it has certainly worked for Spike Lee. It accounts for the riot that brings «Do the Right Thing» to its shocking, and altogether unworthy conclusion, and it helps to explain what has surely been the most prolonged—and, yes, profitable—«mad» ever put on public display by a non-winner of an Academy Award. Indeed, Mr. Lee has invented an entirely new category of uncivil behavior: the sore winner. For «Do the Right Thing» has turned a promising filmmaker into a media phenomenon. If there were the slightest shred of evidence for the «conspiracy» he prates about, it would have generated from enemies who would have made sure that he got *two* Oscars on the night he showed up with tuxedo, pork pie hat, and patch-worked scarf.

Instead, Spike Lee got more air-time on ABC's «Night Line» than any of the winners, and he used that time to make it abundantly clear that he is a very young, young man. That his film lost out to «Driving Miss Daisy» struck him as an outrage, even though he confessed to not having seen it. (One wonders how Mr. Lee would respond to a reviewer who made a similar claim about «Do the Right Thing»?). What matters—indeed, what *always* matters to those out to be more militant than thou—is that Spike had his «take» (as such things are now called) on «...Miss Daisy»; and 'where it was at» (or more precisely *not* at) was this: its actors were old, wrinkled folk (not only Jessica Tandy who is probably too much a lady to dignify such ageist [as in *sexist*, *racist*, etc.] slurs with a reply, but I suspect that Morgan Freeman— not only a consummate actor, but a man who has paid more dues than Spike Lee will ever know about, probably gave strong consideration to popping him in the chops.

Movie *mavins* generally characterize «Driving Miss Daisy» as a «soft» film, which I take to mean that it lacks the hard-driving intensity of, say, a Spike Lee effort. They may well be right about this, but what «Driving Miss Daisy» has, among other things, that «Do the Right Thing» does not is a sense of history. «...Miss Daisy» also has characters who come alive and about whom I find myself caring (the same cannot be said for, say, the spoiled, irresponsible Mookie [Spike Lee] of «Do the Right Thing», or indeed, for the stereotypes that the typical Spike Lee effort tries to pass off as characterization). If such is the stuff of which «soft» films are made—for instance, that love has a place, albeit a tenuous one, in a world where racism has a rock-solid foundation and efforts by way of change make small, yet important, dents— then let us have such films by the dozens. I say this even if, for Spike Lee, the film boils down to a portrait of blacks as chauffeurs and maids, still at the beck-and-call of whiteys—and even more insidious (he claims), «Driving Miss Daisy» is a film that gets tangled up and eventually lost in its own nostalgia for that by-gone world.

By contrast, *his* film tells it like it is, and only those who are hopelessly out of touch will stop to correct the grammat (it's «*as* it is», remember?) and miss the Whole Point. But what, exactly, *is* the point? That racism can only be modified by the word «white» (here, I do admit, that redundancy is the least of my worries), but not by the word «black»? That contemporary urban life is filled, to paraphrase E. M. Forster's words, with «telegrams and anger»? That the choice between the visions of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X is clear, and that



only those in the «...Miss Daisy» crowd would be so deluded as to imagine it is the former? That burning down Sal's Famous is justifiable recompense for the death of Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn)? And perhaps most important of all, that Sal (Danny Aiello) is a fit symbol for the Power blacks must presumably fight if the words of Public Enemy and the flickering images of Spike Lee are true.

More imaginative artists, both black and white, have had larger souls, more compassion, a wider vision. Writing at a time when Jim Crow laws were being passed and the Klan dominated the newspapers of that day every bit as much as Bensonhurst does in our time, Mark Twain—a man at least as well acquainted with racism as Mr. Lee—wrote about an ignorant slum kid named Huck, an escaped slave named Jim, and a raft:

Other places do seem so cramped and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft. ...Soon as it was night, out we shoved; when we got her out to about the middle, we let her alone, and let her float wherever the current wanted her to; then we lit our pipes... and dangled our legs in the water and talked about all kinds of things—we was always naked, day and night, whenever the mosquitoes would let us— ...It's lovely to live on a raft.

In that idyll on the Mississippi—more than an Edenic match for the syrup «Driving Miss Daisy» pours across the silver screen—is not only one of our most powerful archetypes, but also a vision of democratic possibility. That it is under constant threat—like the raft which must contend with currents, with steamboats, and most of all, with scalawags such as the Duke and the King—is true enough, for at its deepest level *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a sad, even heart-breaking book. Yet, one must ask if the lessons that bind Huck to Jim, that prompt him to risk an eternal damnation (which *he* fully believes will be his fate for aiding-and-abetting a slave, even though we, as Twain's readers, know better and cheer our hero's defiance on), are worth nothing? If ever there was a «protest novel» about everything that is ugly and pernicious about racism it is *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Nor does the fact that racism, more than a hundred years later, persists as *the* American problem lessen Twain's achievement. Nor does it diminish the brave words of Ellison's protagonist who, despite his «invisibility», struggles to keep faith with the promises of democratic America, rather than with those, black or white, who would subvert those principles and thus reduce him to a cipher, a symbol, a «thing» to be pulled up or, more often, pushed down. As Ellison put it when he received the National Book Award in 1953, because American life was too vital and alive to be caught by the Jamesian novel and because what we usually think of as the protest novel was too dependent on «physical violence, social cynicism, and understatement», he found himself

...turning to our classical nineteenth-century novelists. I felt that except for the work of William Faulkner something vital had gone out of American prose after Mark Twain. I came to believe that the writers of that period took a much greater responsibility for the condition of democracy and, indeed, their works were imaginative projections of the conflicts within the human heart which arose when the sacred principles of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights clashed with the

practical exigencies of human greed and fear, hate and love. Naturally I was attracted to these writers as a Negro.

One wonders how many students currently attending classes in African-American studies programs have been assigned these words—not only the parts about a writer's responsibility for the «condition of democracy» and the parts that echo Faulkner's pronouncements—from «The Bear» and, later, his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech—about the human heart in conflict with itself, but perhaps even more important than these, the implications of Ellison's last line?

By contrast, Spike Lee makes much of the oppressive heat that glares off the city's sidewalks and boils inside the racist hearts that ride into the «neighborhood» to rip off its pizza-hungry citizens yet one more day. But one wonders if Mr. Lee has paid as much attention to, say, William Faulkner's story «Dry September» as he has to imagining how the *New York Post's* banner headline might look. Albert Camus, whose *The Stranger* makes it clear that he also knows something about the effects that heat can have on a character such as Mersault, once characterized Faulkner's world as one of «heat and dust»; what similar words might apply to Mookie's—heat and hatred? My point is simply that Spike Lee settles for the surface, and for the superficial. One learns something important about the psychodynamics of a lynch mob in Faulkner's story—something that digs deeply into the racist mentality and produces the emotions of pity and fear that were central to classical tragedy; and in his finest achievements—*The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom! Light in August*—those emotions come to us with a force that first surprises and then convinces. I, for one, do not find much that ties «Do the Right Thing» into a similarly convincing package—not the Sal who insists on paying the same Mookie who precipitated the dismantling of his pizzeria and certainly not the pretense that the quotations from Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X that roll across the screen at the end have been dramatized with equal weight.

Among the things that make «Do the Right Thing» so *au courant* are the easy ways it accepts the failure of a democratic America as a fact and racial hatred as inevitability. Indeed, the best «justice» the film can offer is a chance for blacks, white cops, and Korean grocers to get equal time as each in turn stares into the camera and unleashes a string of racial epiphets. It's what Lenny Bruce used to do as *shpritz*—half to shock (in *his* day, words still retained a power, although Bruce, ironically enough, was one of those who eroded that power rather quickly); half to give moral instruction in the way that satirists have always justified their craft and subtle art.

Given the boycotts of Korean green grocers currently being mounted in New York City and elsewhere, one could, of course, argue that Spike Lee had a prophetic finger on the pulse, but the balder truth is that he is much closer to *reportage* than he is to Art. For the microcosm dominated on one end by Sal's Famous and on the other by the representative black community Lee has assembled strikes one as closer to *Porgy and Bess's* Catfish Row than a realistic portrayal of

contemporary black life. As the block's self-appointed «Da Mayor», Ozzie Davis (yet another «wrinkled» actor, but apparently one exempt from Lee's rule of never trusting any whitey over thirty nor any black beyond, say, sixty) retains a certain shaky dignity as one who has simultaneously suffered and survived, but in his mouth, «Do the right thing» reeks of platitude (he might as well be a Platonius in blackface), of appeasement, of (heaven forbid!) reconciliation —this, despite the fact that he is the only character in the film who performs an act one could call courageous. (I do not number myself among those who regard Mookie's act of heaving a garbage can through the window of Sal's Famous as the stuff of «courage»).

Yet, Da Mayor is as foreign to Mookie and his crowd as history; what happened to him certainly won't happen to them, although with the exception of Mookie's sister Jade (Loie Lee), what the film demonstrates is that while the «words» of shucking-and-jiving may change (the Greek chorus of Paul Benjamin, Franic Falson and Robin Harris huddled beneath their sidewalk umbrella differ sharply from Radio Raheem and his grotesquely oversized «blaster» or Buggin' Out's increasingly desperate effort to politicize the community by turning Sals all-Italian «Wall of Fame» into the stuff that justifies a boycott) the essential music remains the same. These are meant to be colorful characters all right, but so too are the denizens of Catfish Row. Neither, however, tell us much about the subtle realities of black life (given the fact that Lee reduces nearly everyone in his film to the level of cartoon figures, how could it?), but at least in the case of *Porgy and Bess*, Gershwin's score is memorable in ways that, at least for my ears, Public Enemy's noise is, not.

«Do the Right Thing» asks us to «Fight the Power», but not only is the «power» not Sal, it is the glib way that Spike Lee transforms him into a convenient symbol that gives me the willies. For when an artist loses touch with human beings —taken one by one, black or white— bad Art and dangerous Ideas are sure to follow. And in «Do the Right Thing»— for all its illusion of «community» —Mookie strikes me as an isolated character: in the scenes with his girlfriend Tina (Rosie Perez) and his essentially fatherless child; in his endless squabbles with his sister Jade; indeed, in the very way that his job as delivery boy allows simultaneously for movement and stasis, for Mookie fits comfortably into neither Sal's world (just ask Pino [John Turturro]), Sal's virulently racist son) nor the world into which Sal's customers will enter when they graduate, and that Spike Lee had already devastated in «School Daze».

Again, what Baldwin says about *Native Son* —in «Many Thousands Gone»— can, with a pinch here, a tuck there, be applied to «Do the Right Thing»:

What the novel reflects —and at no point interprets— is the isolation of the Negro within his own group and the resulting fury of impatient scorn. It is this which creates its climate of anarchy and unmotivated and unapprehending disaster; and it is this climate, come to most Negro protest novels, which has led us all to believe that in Negro life there exists no tradition, no field of manners, no possibility of ritual or intercourse, such as may, for example, sustain the Jew even after he has left his father's house. But the fact is not that the Negro has no

tradition but that there has as yet arrived no sensibility sufficiently profound and tough enough to make this tradition articulate. For a tradition expresses, after all, nothing more than the long and painful experience of a people; it comes out of the battle waged to maintain their integrity, to put it more simply, out of their struggle to survive. When we speak of the Jewish tradition we are speaking of centuries of exile and persecution, of the strength which endured and the sensibility which discovered in it the high possibility of the moral victory.

Baldwin himself meant to be part of the new «articulate» sensibility he called for, part of a tradition that could move the crudities of the protest novel into something profoundly richer; and in some of his books, he was —as were, and are, such writers as Ellison and Toni Morrison. But Spike Lee is destined to be written down as the writer-director-actor of «everybody's protest film», and as I have tried to argue, that is no longer enough, nor was it ever enough. He will, no doubt, become yet another talk show «personality» —one known for being known— in a culture already far too crowded with such types.

That he is a black artist in a country that needs sensibility and articulate speech more than ever merely compounds the shame. For Spike Lee is a talented young man with a keener eye for generating controversy than for making coherent films. Whatever else may be said of his latest effort, «Mo' Better Blues», it did not lack for ambition —at least according to Mr. Lee. As a film about jazz and jazz musicians, «Mo' Better Blues» aimed to demolish the competition; and not only such recent efforts as Clint Eastwood's «Bird» or Bertrand Tavernier's «Round midnight», but also everything from «Man With the Golden Arm» onward. Unfortunately, the center of «Mo' Better Blues» does not hold. At what *should* be its center is Bleek Gilliam (Denzel Washington), a man obsessed enough with his trumpet to suffer all for his Art. That he is a significant cut below the genius of, say, a Charles Mingus is presumably less important than the fact that Bleek —a matinee idol if there ever was one— is caught between two women (one a schoolteacher, the other an aspiring singer) who compete for his attention and who, taken together, represent a threat to his practice time. If all this sounds vaguely familiar, it is —for Hollywood has been churning out similar froth for decades.

What Lee adds, of course, are black faces, and a less-than-subtle thesis about the exploitation of black musicians. The issue, in short, comes down to contral, or if you wish, to *power*. And in «Mo' Better Blues», the pursestrings are in the tight-fisted, altogether despicable hands of Moe and Josh Flatbush (John and Nicholas Turturro). No matter that Bleek's manager, Giant (Spike Lee) is inept or that he cares more about placing a bet than he does about looking out for Bleek's best interests; no matter that the track record of Jewish managers and black musicians is decidedly better than Lee's film implies; and finally, no matter that black faces are conspicuously absent in the crowd where Bleek performs —what makes it tough for a good looker like Bleek Gilliam are whiteys, and Jewish whiteys in particular.

Not surprisingly, the *New York Times* soon crackled with accusations about anti-Semitism and then with counter-charges by Spike Lee himself: «I'm not a racist; I'm not a bigot; I am not an anti-Semite [he wrote in an August 22, 1990

op-ed piece]. What I try to do with all my characters is offer what I feel are honest portraits of individuals with both faults and endearing characteristics». True enough for, say, the embattled Sal of «Do the Right Thing», but for the Flatbush brothers of «Mo' Better Blues»? Hardly. Indeed, to find its equal one would have to look not to Hollywood, but to the rough-and-tumble vaudeville stage at the turn of the century (where grotesque portrayures of drunken Irishmen, shuffling blacks, and dishonest Jews brought down the house) or to the hate-mongering of demagogues like Gerald L. K. Smith and Father Coughlin.

Lee's defense —if that is the proper word for it— comes down to filing a cross-complaint against «Birth of a Nation», «Song of the Song», «Dumbo», and any film in which blacks are portrayed as pimps, murderers, prostitutes, convicts, rapists, or drug addicts:

There is a double standard at work in the accusations of anti-Semitism. I challenge anyone to tell me why I can't portray two club owners who happen to be Jewish and who exploit black jazz musicians who work for them. All Jewish club owners are not like this, that's true, but these two are...

Just for the sake of argument, let's say that Moe and Josh Flatbush are stereotypes. Let's compare their 10 minutes of screentime with 100 years of Hollywood cinema. Let's get real. That's hypocrisy.

But suppose one argued as follows: «I challenge anyone to tell me why I cannot portray two drug addicts who happen to be black and who also happen to be pimps. All blacks are not like this, that's true, but these two are». Could he or she bank on Mr. Lee's support, or would he insist that what is fair for a black gander is likely to cook a white goose?

Generally speaking, questions of this sort do not come up when we talk about serious artists (Pound, of course, remains a spectacular exception, but hardly the only instance) —at least so long as we confine our remarks to the Work as opposed to the lives that created them. But that is the sad point that such squabbles come to: Spike Lee seems more interested in belaboring the issue of «control», of simultaneously bashing the Establishment and playing its game, than he is in creating anything that a Baldwin or an Ellison would recognize as Art. And if the advance press about such future Spike Lee projects as «Jungle Fever» or a biography of Malcolm X are even half true, I suspect he will continue to wear the dubious mantle as «everybody's protest filmmaker».