



# A Level Film Studies 'Do The Right Thing' (Lee, USA, 1989)

## COMPONENT 1: VARIETIES OF FILM AND FILMMAKING Section A: Hollywood 1930-1990 (comparative study)

Written examination: 2.5 hours  
35% of qualification

AO1 Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of elements of film  
AO2 Apply knowledge and understanding of elements of film to:  
analyse and compare films, including through the use of critical approaches  
evaluate the significance of critical approaches  
analyse and evaluate own work in relation to other professionally produced work

### CONTEXTS

#### Production | Social and Political | Critical Debate

'Do the Right Thing' couldn't have arrived at a more turbulent and opportune moment. New York City had been rocked by a number of racially charged incidents, for example the mob killings of Michael Griffiths and Yusuf Hawkins invoked in the film's opening. The film is also deeply prophetic in terms of how the relationship between US police forces and black youth has further deteriorated over the years, due to a number of killings of unarmed African-Americans. What is also important is the continuing rise in the popularity of hip-hop and rap culture. Public Enemy were by far the most politicised of these artists, articulating their anger at their position in what they saw as a racially divided America.

### SYNOPSIS

Salvatore "Sal" Fragione (Danny Aiello) is the Italian owner of a pizzeria in Brooklyn. A neighbourhood local, Buggin' Out (Giancarlo Esposito), becomes upset when he sees that the pizzeria's Wall of Fame exhibits only Italian actors. Buggin' Out believes a pizzeria in a black neighbourhood should showcase black actors, but Sal disagrees. The wall becomes a symbol of racism and hate to Buggin' Out and to other people in the neighbourhood, and tensions rise.

### IDEOLOGY AND THEMES

'Do the Right Thing' is arguably Spike Lee's finest film. It is a visually and sonically inventive piece of cinema, which beautifully captures the heat and bubbling racial tensions of late 1980s Brooklyn. Its themes of division, anger and police brutality are as important today as they were when the film was first made. Many themes in the movie include; gentrification, racial bias, bigotry and police brutality.

### TERMINOLOGY

REPRESENTATION

AUTEUR THEORY

STUDIO SYSTEM

CANTED ANGLE

## AUTEUR

Spike Lee's position as an auteur is certainly closely aligned to a number of factors around the visual style of his films but also his preoccupations as a black filmmaker of the position of African-Americans in US society.

Racism

Vibrant colours

Bold, unfamiliar camera angles and shot types.

Places audience inside the world.

Stylised dialogue.

Fourth wall breaks – Brechtian

Post classical (post-MTV) editing and cinematography.

Symbolic character introductions.

## LANGUAGE AND MISE EN SCENE

The vivid mise-en-scène reflects the heightened reality presented in the film. This is reflected in the highly stylised use of costume and the attention to detail where the wrong or right sort of trainer is given a huge amount of significance.

The major conflict in the film is underpinned by the pictures in Sal's Pizzeria, showing prominent Italian-Americans. Buggin' Out wants these replaced by photographs that reflect the full spectrum of famous African-Americans from Michael Jordan to Malcolm X.

## NARRATIVE | GENRE

Spike Lee utilises **music, comedy, drama**, vignettes of typical behaviour, and figures who present the messages that he wishes to convey.

## KEY SEQUENCES

- OPENING CREDITS
- RACIAL SLUR MONTAGE
- YUPPIE VS BUGGIN' OUT
- DEATH OF RADIO RAHEEM
- RIOT SCENE

## SPECTATORSHIP

One of the strengths of the film is the complexity of its characters and the representations of blackness on screen. Lee moved beyond stereotypes of African Americans in cinema and created characters reflected in the everyday. In "Do The Right Thing", black people are NOT presented in the traditional binary of subservient and smiling, or violent and dangerous, but rather are able to exist as complex characters which neither please or displease.

## PAST PAPER QUESTIONS

(a) Compare how far your chosen films reflect the auteur signature features of their filmmakers.

(b) Compare how far your chosen films reflect their different production contexts.