STEREOTYPES IN SPIKE LEE'S *DO THE RIGHT THING* AND *BAMBOOZLED*

Adela Livia Catană

Assist. PhD., Military Technical Academy, Bucharest

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to offer a compared analysis of two well-known movies directed by Spike Lee and reveal numerous stereotypes regarding African Americans as well as some new forms of resistance to racism through self-irony and public education.

Keywords: African-Americans, education, racism, resistance, stereotypes.

This article tries to analyse the stereotypes concerning African Americans and their culture in two of Spike Lee's movies *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and *Bamboozled* (2001). The generalizations born back in colonial times, when slaves were seen as inheritable goods, have always had a great impact over the public and have deeply influenced the militant mission of the Black Cinema. Being one of the most famous African American directors, Spike Lee has revolutionized the industry by making movies based on Black problems with Black actors. Along his career, he has emphasized the racial injustice faced by the people of colour and their various forms of resistance. Spike Lee and his production company, "Forty Acres and a Mule Filmworks", are also known to shock the audience by presenting controversial issues and criticizing the faults of their fellows. Although his attempts to educate the public and make Black people see themselves as they really are, with good as well as bad parts, have many times been misinterpreted, Lee's general intention may be summarized in the sentence: "We are always Responsible for our own failure." (Baraka 153).

The study of 'race' and 'ethnicity' in film has been influenced not only by the idea that "cross-ethnic political agenda geared to white supremacy's massive deployment", but also by the "discrete histories and political projects of specific identity sites: African American, Asian American, Chicano-Latino, Native American, Jewish American, Italian American, and Irish American (Wiegman 158).

The terms of 'race' and 'ethnicity' have had different definitions over the decades. Nowadays, they are considered to be "social constructions linked to the specific discursive spheres within which they are used" (Hill and Gibson 130). While, 'ethnicity' triggers "differentiations based on culture, language and national origins" the concept of 'race' represents "a biological distinction evinced by skin, hair and cranial shape" which justifies "political and economic hierarchies between white and non-white groups" (Wiegman 160). Nevertheless, both of them generate numerous stereotypes which directors usually employ in their movies reinforcing them in the public's consciousness. According to Eugene Franklin Wong, stereotypes are born in relation to historical and political events, labour practices, ideologies concerning race, sexuality and gender, and are rendered in movies through narrative, setting, characterization, costume and cosmetics (qtd in Hill and Gibson 112). Moreover, they seem to be antonymic and oscillate between two extremes: positive-negative, good-bad, noble-savage, loyal-traitorous (Wiegman 161).

BDD-A25654 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:51:37 UTC)

Being at the opposite pole compared to the White majority, African Americans have constantly been depicted as violent, primitive, servile, irresponsible, dirty, lazy, religious or superstitious. In literature, movies and media, they have embodied different archetypes such as: 'Black-face', 'Sambo', 'Mammy', 'Mandingo Negro', 'Sapphire', 'Drug Lords', 'Welfare queen', 'Angry Black Woman' or the 'Independent Black Woman' among others. The Black spectator's reaction was one of resistance and, just as Diawara underlines, "one of the roles of black independent cinema, must be to increase spectator awareness of the impossibility of an uncritical acceptance of Hollywood products" (210). Spike Lee's resistance as a director materialized, however, by denouncing stereotypes and abusing them in order to show their ridicule. Lee welcomed the controversy that his films attracted and, just as Craig Watkins underlines, he "strategically maneuvered [the nature of the popular film] to call into question the racial barriers that characterize the commercial film industry" (107).

Stereotypes are not born only in relation to the subjugating white community or other non-white groups; they also exist among Black people and Lee's movies definitely underline this aspect. *Do the Right Thing* deals mostly with racism between Blacks and other groups, especially Italian Americans, while his later movie, *Bamboozled*, focuses more on the internal problems in the African American community and on intra-racism, also defined as the animosity between African Americans with lighter skin and those with a darker one. In addition, both movies reflect political, social and gender stereotypes.

Released in 1989, in a troubled context, *Do the Right Thing* underlines the tragic consequences of the tensions among races. Its action takes place on the hottest day of the year in Bedford-Stuyvesant, a multiracial, multi-ethnic neighbourhood in Brooklyn, New York.
Although African Americans are more numerous, they are not able to work or organize themselves and spend all day long drinking, watching what others are doing, listening to music or quarrelling. The economic life of this place is represented only by Sal's Pizzeria, run by the Italian-American family and a grocery owned by a Korean family, while African Americans seem to lack ambition to do something, each of them waiting for a certain opportunity that never seems to come. An example in this case is Buggin' Out, interpreted by Giancarlo Esposito. He embodies the voice of this community saying that he had enough of being kept at the bottom of the ladder. Yet, he does nothing to overcome his condition. Likewise, the film protagonist Mookie, played by Lee, works as a pizza delivery boy and his sole motivation is to get paid. Their lack of ambition or positive action is a defining feature of the Brooklyn community which otherwise, never ceases to be vibrant and watched the eye of an all knowing God, the "We Love Radio DJ", Mr Senor Love Daddy (Samuel L Jackson).
As the temperature rises the conflicts evolve as well. At the beginning of the movie the public witnesses the quarrel between Salvatore 'Sal' Frangione (Danny Aiello), his sons Pino (John Turturro), "who detests the place like a sickness", and Vito (Richard Edson), Mookie's friend (*Do the Right Thing*). This is doubled by the misunderstanding between Da Mayor (Ossie Davis), an old drunk man, and Mother Sister (Ruby Dee), who spends her time watching the people through her window. Later, some teenagers, a driver and the police fight about the flooding of a car. Buggin' Out (Giancarlo Esposito) has a misunderstanding with Sal about the "Wall of Fame" which lacked pictures of black celebrities. Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn) "argues" with some Puerto Rican men who are playing their radios loudly at each other. Buggin' Out instigates a fight with a white man, Clifton (John Savage) who accidentally stepped on his Air Jordan shoes. Mookie and Pino have a contradiction regarding Blacks and Italians and end up by insulting each other. Buggin' Out, Radio Raheem and Smiley begin to insult and threaten their neighbours.

The climax is represented by the fight between Sal and Radio Raheem. The police intervene and mistakenly kill Radio Raheem. The angry crowd, that gathered to witness the fight, attacks Sal and his sons. Mookie throws a trash can through the window of Sal's restaurant

BDD-A25654 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:51:37 UTC)

and saves the Italians' lives by turning the collective anger towards their property. Afterwards, the mob destroys the Korean shop whose owner, Sonny (Steve Park), desperately yells: "I no white! I black! You, me, same! We same!" (*Do the Right Thing*). Sadly, his desire for mutual understanding is not listened to. This proves that the Black did not have a problem only with the white community but also with all the non-black groups and did not care that Asians were also being discriminated.

This chain of conflicts does not only enforce the stereotypes according to which African Americans are troublemakers, violent, have no self-control and get easily involved in criminal activates, but also proves a certain frustration they have as well as their lack of ambition or strength to overcome their life condition. Spike Lee brings his fellows in an unfavourable light in order to show that they have become exactly what society expected them to be – villains. However, the director hopes to teach Black audience a moral lesson and convince it to act and improve itself. The pictures of famous Black people cannot be hanged on the "Wall of Fame" by force, as it happens in the movie, because this would be a gesture deprived of real value. The photos will be displayed there only when the whole African American community will learn not to "Fight the Power" (Public Enemy's song which can be heard a lot during the movie) using physical force and range but in a positive and constructive way. The moviemaker is not far from the "the hype", described by Houston A. Baker, Jr., as the "ideology of Yankee ingenuity and bootstrap individualism" that White America desires for Black America to believe (174). Yet, he promotes the idea of a Black Hype thinking that people of colour can evolve using their own resources rather than external help if they acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses.

Spike Lee's second movie, *Bamboozled*, represents in Slaner and Clyne's view, "an intricate which blends both (1) the deconstruction of racial stereotypes and (2) the exploitation of racial stereotypes for their entertainment value" (8). It is an entertainment experiment which got out of control and has tragic consequences. Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans) is a Harvard-educated African-American who works as a television writer for a white boss Thomas Dunwitty (Michael Rapaport). The latter proclaims himself "black" and entitles the right to offend his fellow "niggers". Hoping to get fired so that he could work for another company, Delacroix helped by his assistant, Sloane Hopkins (Jada Pinkett Smith), works on "the minstrel show for the new millennium". He creates blackface characters, real buffoons: such as ManTan, Sleep 'n' Eat, and Aunt Jemima, abuses stereotypes and uses extremely offensive jokes.

Delacroix strongly believes that the show would to excite popular outrage, but to his surprise, it becomes a huge success which too few and weak detractors. Manray (Savion Glover) and Womack (Tommy Davidson), two performers recruited from the street in order to ruin the show, become big stars. Despite his original plans, Delacroix, defends the show as being satirical and enjoys the fame he achieved. Meanwhile, Hopkins becomes terrified by the racist plaque triggered.

From now on, just like in *Do the Right Thing*, the public witnesses a chain of increasing tensions: Delacroix and Hopkins argue; her older brother Julius (Mos Def) and the Mau Maus, a rap band, are increasingly angry because of the show and plan to take revenge; Womack quits, and Manray shocks the audience with his final performance and gets fired. Soon the tensions transform themselves into violent conflicts as Manray is kidnapped and executed on a live webcast; the police kill all the Mau Maus members except for a white man, who yells to be shot as well like all of his black brothers; furious Hopkins kills Delacroix and flees after making everything seem a suicide.

Bamboozled highlights on one hand the "complex emotional responses of the performers who must " 'black up' before going on stage" and on the other, creates a "highly entertaining pageant of traditional minstrel show entertainment" which triggers "a maze of apparently contradictory signals about racial stereotyping" (Slaner and Clyne 2).

BDD-A25654 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:51:37 UTC)

While working on his show, Delacroix is gets inspired by the cartoons from the first half of the twentieth century, films like *Birth of a Nation* and *The Jazz Singer*, documentary footage of soft shoe and tap, newsreels of watermelon-eating contests, and so on. The stereotypes that he employs also include visual exaggerations of facial and bodily characteristics such as:
shiny black faces, huge, "liver" lips, bulging white eyes, rotund women with skinny, diminutive men, and of course, blackface makeup for both blacks and whites. Personality characterizations include vacant stares, slow, slurred speech, exaggerated deference to whites, fearful trembling, spasmodic gesturing, cannibalism, and gustatory excitements occasioned by chicken houses and "nigger apples." (Slaner and Clyne 9).

All the characters backstage reveal archetypes and intra-racism. Delacroix, whose real name was actually Peerless Dothan, embodies the type of the educated African American who tries to be more interesting, act aristocratic, achieve fame with all means possible. Moreover, he feels superior to the other black people and does not enjoy associating too much to them. Sloane Hopkins alternates between the 'Independent Black Woman' who is criticised due to her financial successful and accused of sleeping with her boss in order to be promoted, and the 'Angry Black Woman' who berates black males. Manray and Womack and all the other characters which appear on the strange with them can easily been seen as 'Black-face', 'Sambo', 'Mammy', 'Mandingo Negro', 'Sapphire', while the rappers are definitely the 'Drug Lords', 'Crack Victims', in one word, the 'Evil'.

Starting from the idea that "There is no such thing as negative publicity", Spike Lee also underlines the commercial character of stereotypes and of racism in general. Terms such as "politically correctness", lines such as: "I have a Yale Ph.D. in African American Studies" or the idea of fraternizing and becoming Black, do not show respect or admiration towards Blacks but accentuate de racial differences, give stereotype a more important place and generate a new type of discrimination (*Bamboozled*). This is much worse than before, because it is 'slippery' and acts in the shadow.

In conclusion, Spike Lee's movies *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and *Bamboozled* (2001) make the public aware of the stereotypes and the inter/intra-racism which concern the African American community. They raise many controversies because instead of praising the qualities of the Blacks, they unmask their faults and criticises them severely while trying to teach the audience some very important lessons such as avoiding violence, acting for a better change, embracing tolerance and acceptance.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources:
Do the Right Thing. Dir. Spike Lee. 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks, 1989. Film.
Bamboozled. Dir. Spike Lee. 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks, 2001. Film.

Secondary Sources:
Baker, Jr., Houston A. "Spike Lee and the Commerce of Culture." *Black American Cinema*. ed. Manthia Diawara. New York: Routledge, 1993. 154-176.
Baraka, Amiri. "Spike Lee at the Movies." *Black American Cinema*. ed. Manthia Diawara. New York: Routledge, 1993. 145-153.
Diawara, Manthia. "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance" *Black American Cinema.* ed. Manthia Diawara. New York: Routledge, 1993. 211-221.
Hill, John, and Pamela Church. Gibson. *Film Studies: Critical Approaches*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.

BDD-A25654 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:51:37 UTC)

Slaner, Stephen E.and Clyne, Sandra. *The Use of Spike Lee's Bamboozled to Promote Difficult Dialogues on Race*. Northern Essex Community College & Northeastern University/Bunker Hill Community College. 2008.
Watkins, S. Craig. "Black Cinema and the Changing Landscape of Industrial Image Making". *Representing. Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998. 77-106.
Wiegman, Robyn. "Race, Ethnicity and Film". *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, eds. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. 158-168.

BDD-A25654 © 2017 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:51:37 UTC)