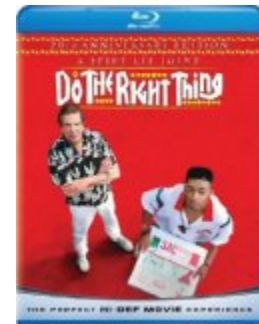


An Introduction to Spike Lee's "Do the Right Thing"

One of my areas of research is the study of movies and TV shows about intercultural relations. I study films that promote better intercultural relations, that say something about intercultural relations. These include films and TV programs like *Crash*, *Dances with Wolves*, *Remember the Titans*, *The Blind Side*, *Avatar*, *The Help*, *All in the Family*, *Roots*, *Dora: The Explorer* and *Chappelle's Show*.

And, of course, this would include [Spike Lee](#) films like *Jungle Fever*, *Malcolm X*, *Bamboozled* and *Do the Right Thing*. *Do the Right Thing* is of special interest. When I study films like these I ask a few key questions: (1) Why was the film made? (2) What is the rhetorical message of the film? (3) How does it persuade an audience? (4) How well does it persuade an audience?

For *Do the Right Thing*, let's look at the first two questions: Why was it made and what's the message? According to the [Do the Right Thing companion book](#) and according to the [make-of features on the DVD/Blu-ray](#), Spike Lee wrote the script, at least in part, as a response to the racial attacks near a pizzeria in Howard Beach (Queens, NY). In December of 1986, three young African American men were in Queens when their car broke down. They walked to [Howard Beach](#) to find a pay phone. They stopped at a Howard Beach pizzeria to eat. As they left they were chased by a dozen white youth yelling racial slurs. One of the three African-American men, Michael Griffith, 23, was beaten and chased into traffic where he was hit by a car and died. Check the ABC News video below for further details of the event and the subsequent reactions.

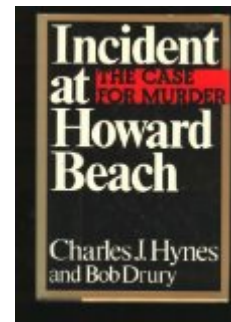


[Dec. 22, 1986: Racial Attacks in N.Y.](#) (ABC News)
(Did you notice the ABC News reporter for the story? Bill O'Reilly)

More on the Howard Beach attack:

- [Howard Beach Incident \(1986\)](#) (BlackPast.org)
- [Man chased to his death in Howard Beach hate-crime](#) (History.com)
- [Howard Beach, Then and Now: Conditions and Voices Grow Calmer](#) (NYT)

[Incident at Howard Beach: The Case For Murder](#)



A year after the Howard Beach attacks, in December 1987, Spike Lee sat down and started writing *Do the Right Thing*. He and his crew shot the film in [Bedford-Stuyvesant](#) (Brooklyn) in the summer of 1988 and the film was released in the summer of 1989. [Some critics thought](#) the film would provoke racial riots. Other praised it. Many now think of it as a classic, [one of the greatest films made](#).

On the 20th anniversary of the release of the film Lee said "When I wrote the script ... New York City was a very polarized city, racially," he said. "I wanted to do a film that would try to show what was happening at the time." (['Do the Right Thing' still has something to say](#), CNN, 2009)

So, we have an answer to the question of why was the film made. Now, for the other question. What is the message of the film? The obvious answer is "Do the Right Thing." But, what does that mean? Does that change depending on the situation? At the end of the film Lee puts two quotes on the screen.

The first is from Martin Luther King, Jr.

"Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. It is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than to convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends by defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers."

The second is from Malcolm X.

"I think there are plenty of good people in America, but there are also plenty of bad people in America and the bad ones are the ones who seem to have all the power and be in these positions to block things that you and I need. Because this is the situation, you and I have to preserve the right to do what is necessary to bring an end to that situation, and it doesn't mean that I advocate violence, but at the same time I am not against using violence in self-defense. I don't even call it violence when it's self-defense, I call it intelligence."

So, what is the right thing? What is the right thing to do?

The above are the notes I'll use tonight for my introduction of the [*Do the Right Thing* showing on the Norfolk State University campus.](#)

If you also have an interest in films and intercultural relations I'd recommend starting with [*Crossing Cultures Through Film*](#) and of course contact me and I could share more.

Check out [*The Story of Love and Hate*](#)

See more at my web site [WilliamHartPhD.com](#).