

Writing about Spike Lee presented itself as an idea long ago, as a reaction to seeing the work and the ideas it carries. Clarke (male name, non-Afro name, light-skinned) is the artist, the independent; Indigo carries only her stylized Blackness as a lure to drag the Black artist away from his art, creating a polarity between her art and life as simple-minded as any bourgeois delusion. (A few others have had limited or one shot deals with the majors, for instance, Ivan Dixon, Harry Belafonte, perhaps even recently, Eddie Murphy with his two fine films *Coming to America* and *Harlem Nights*.) The general concept of an independent Black film practice coming out of an independent Black film movement leading to, hopefully, an independent Black film industry, has been, since Micheaux, the object of many tons of rhetoric and even a few tons of important work. "The problem of the 20th Century is the Color Line," said DuBois. This is a century which is, he also pointed out, the age of propaganda. It is Art that strives to reflect life. What is, is always what's "heaviest." So that reality, its impact on us as truth, as stunning actuality, is delivered by art in varied ways: styles and forms. Art is the statement, the content, as a total expression of what is true, objective, no matter how fictional it may seem. What exists is a statement. Its being can be counted and spelled. But unreality is also an actually existing category of being. That is, as an expression, even unreality becomes "a landscape" of its creator's world, as an idea, or a film. Wars are based on delusion. The real lives we live are countable and spellable as well. And what we do, how we live, who we are, produce our ideas. What we create expresses objectively who we are as much as what we think. Also, in a class society, where and when we exist in terms of the ideology, the views we express, coincides with the dialectical objective world, or not, as an elaboration of real social life. We do not exist singly, not even in our head. So we are part of many like lives, feelings, ideas, creations, and so on, existing elsewhere. We are voices speaking for the particularity of our registrations, but also products of particular classes. Spike Lee expresses for me a recognizable type and trend in American society. He is the quintessential buppie, almost the spirit of the young, upwardly mobile, Black, petit bourgeois professional. Broadened, he is an American trend. Emerging as an indication of social and class motion, his development is expressed as a political economy, culture, and history. But Spike has said he did not want to be concerned with history. So, in effect, what he claims as his art is confined to the contemporary moment. Yet who will deny the crushing immediacy as art and social expression of films made on the Middle Passage or Equiano or Douglass or Harriet Tubman? Is there anything "further removed" than Nat Turner's Confession? What we locate as "new" is an expression of how much we knew at the time! The history of Black life in America is reflected as a jagged forward and backward, upward and downward, yet on further reflection, forward up in spite. After each revolutionary leap forward: the Black antislavery movement of the nineteenth century leading to the Civil War; the early twentieth century movement against lingering slavery and colonialism which brought Garvey, DuBois, Hughes, Hurston, McKay, The Harlem Renaissance; The 1950s to 1970s Civil Rights and Black Liberation Movement and Malcolm, Dr. King, the Panthers, Baldwin and Hansberry, Trane, Ornette, Cecil, and so on. Amiri Baraka I 147 After each move upward there is a reaction, the most negative from the corrupt imperialist state and those institutions that were pushed in the superstructure (ideas and art as well as institutions are produced by an economic system fighting to survive). (The students only come in contact with the Black community in Kentucky Fried Chicken joints!) The light-skinned/darkskinned

conflict eschews actual class analysis. The drama in this worn-out genre comes through the recognition of topicality a la mode with character types confirming the conclusions of the superstructure, contending only for their place in the superstructure, carrying forward that special bourgeois nationalism that the petit bourgeois use for militance! In *Do the Right Thing*, Mars has become Mookie, the name of a popular Amiri Baraka I 149 Black ballplayer formerly with the NY Mets. The college student has become a messenger employed by the bourgeoisie, and thereby becomes seemingly the only active worker in the community. The mainstream political figure Da Mayor is a disillusioned alcoholic unable to understand or accept responsibility. His counsel to Mookie is, "Do the Right Thing." Its source seems to describe its seriousness. We were told that the film would relate to the Howard Beach lynching. Yet nothing in the film bears witness to this except the rawest opportunism. The youth, Rahim, is murdered and the "riot" initiated because he is playing his radio too loud. But why, since this is not the cause of most poor, Black and Latino youths who are killed by the police? To depict the riot in this way is to assume the stance of the murderers, the State. Like Clifford Glover, Philip Patel, Yusef Hawkins, Emmett Till, and so on, who were murdered for playing their radips too loud. Like Malcolm and Dr. King—For playing their radios too loud! Rahim is the lone Muslim name (described by Spike in some text as a "Knucklehead," bugged out too!). Black Music is the griot' stale, Pres' "story," learning the lyrics of the song, a specific "humanization"! Like the failure to make the Howard Beach film, the refusal to make *A Love Supreme* as a living expansion of the music is likewise a decision to turn away from real history. Even some attention to the form of Black music would have provided the audience multiple avenues to the film. Spike's scenes are ponderous and anecdotal. The camera is too passive as a narrative voice and entirely serial and blocked. To do *A Love Supreme*, the philosophy of Trane's music, and himself in relationship to it, would have to be the premise. The emotion in Trane's music is sperm and memory. Love is the highest emotion because it points to the evolving unity of the consciousness, from the base of that which it is the expression of. What is intellectual in Trane is the stance of openness to image and motion as an immediacy, feeling. Spike closes down Trane. The worlds we carry, our creations, are advertisements of our real lives. Dumas, Angelou, Baldwin, Hughes, Neal create a literature that uses the music as a probe of history and feeling. Consider the music's "information" alone, from all the different feelings expressed to the social life and history depicted. There is a retrograde trend, to paraphrase Lenin after the failure of the 1905 revolution, describing "The Economists," which dismissed political struggle and declared instead that the economic struggle was principal. There is a whole successful school of Negro theater and film personalities whose fundamental identity is as caricaturists of the Black revolutionary politics and art of the I 960s, as if Black consciousness and political activism, and even the most historic and spontaneously creative aspects of the African and African-American culture, are merely Mantan Moreland cartoons. In some ways I connect Spike with this school. We can, as Mao said, identify in art a class stand, an audience (for whom?), and also those whom the artist implicitly praises and condemns: what he has studied and what he does. Literature, Mao said, was an ideological reflection of real Life. She's Gotta Have It was tied to an ingenuous bourgeois feminism (its best "defense"). The abandoning of a style, personified as "doing the right thing," exposes its superficial relationship to real life, Black love, and art, by forcing the artist to abandon his art for family. As if the two

(and Spike L. has made some like comments) cannot coexist. A bourgeois calumny, but why does Spike push it? The music is made into a cloak for a bourgeois distortion of what art, what life is. Even the relationships are skewed in the same way. Spike puts Miles Davis's criticisms of Trane (that he played too long) in Bleek's mouth about Shadow, but then he uses Shadow as the mouthpiece of ignorance, putting Bleek (who is in no stretch of anyone's imagination a Trane-like figure) down for being too inaccessible to the masses. Does Spike think that Trane was inaccessible to the masses? Is that why the most famous piece of music to come out of one of Spike L.'s Joints is Da Butt? Is this why My Favorite Things was on the hit parade? What was inaccessible to the masses was the high-priced nightclubs (owned by the "Hackensacks" and the PaterSonnies) that the musicians are forced to play in, usually in "White neighborhoods." Mookie's entrance into the struggle, with the brick, elaborates Spike's class stand with excruciating clarity!—Joining the struggle late and uncommitted yet becoming, de facto, its leader, its most militant force, yet alienated from the Black masses and acting "independently" of them, as some kind of petit bourgeois "leadership"! Mo' Better Blues is disappointing because of what it proposes to be about. Alice Coltrane stopped Spike from calling the film A Love Supreme, 150 I Spike Lee at the Movies for it is not just about curse words. Alice knows that the music is still a live communicating being, that the world of its creators is a historical and fundamental subtext of Black life, American life, of history and struggle. The past become present—what is. The music is not background. It is "God" as much as anything else! That some commentators raised "anti-Semitism" because the aggressively negative club owners were Jewish is humorous and irritating. Now Spike joins Farrakhan, Jesse J. and Mandela as enemies of humanity and supporters of the Holocaust! It is an indication of the utter ruthlessness of imperialism that it accuses its victims of being it! What Mo' Better suffers from is a failure to understand the expression — 152 I Spike Lee at the Movies of the social that art is, and the emotional depth of real life. Tell the Love Supreme story in the context of "The Great Satan"! But to drop, nay droop slyly the "inaccessible to the masses" tip on Trane as an excuse for commerce and stale hops is jive. I think this is one reason why the music is not taken on straight ahead, and the great classics of African-American musical statement are used so sparsely. The discography cited by the musicians playing in the film is particularly chilling because it is so limited and parochial and "contemporary" in the sense of its temporal structure. ... "has already been spread through the film copiously. Even other women hated Nola, except the lesbian.) ..-..-..... . ~ ,., 148 I Spike Lee at the Movies My concern about the film turns upon the total statements the film makes. The three brothers squatting around a frantic bohemian Negress are who? Part of the chauvinism of most Black men is that they would not sit still for such. So what is the specific function of these guys? Ironically, the sexually freewheeling Black woman is not new; in fact, this echoes the basic slavemaster propaganda. So what are we left with? What is being said about Black women and Black men and the time and place where we live? What is being said is neither new nor progressive. School Daze continues the "pop" cartoon approach to one segment of Black life. Mo' Better avoids open caricature, at least for the central characters forming the triangle (though the band is still cartoonish, ditto Spike's own returning trademark nigger nebbish ... Giant?