

More of Spike Lee's filmmaking

Summer of Sam, directed by Spike Lee, written by Victor Colicchio, Michael Imperioli and Lee

David Walsh
8 July 1999

Spike Lee has made a film about the summer of 1977 in New York City, when the serial killer, David Berkowitz, who became known as the Son of Sam, was at large. Lee's film focuses on an Italian-American neighborhood in the Bronx where tensions mount.

I don't know of any film in recent years that has created in me such a feeling of repugnance. This is a highly unclean film.

Vinny (John Leguizamo) is a womanizing hairdresser; his wife Dionna (Mira Sorvino) works in her father's restaurant as a waitress. Vinny is fearful of asking his apparently respectable wife to engage in more exotic sexual practices. After an episode of philandering with her cousin, he happens upon a crime scene where the serial killer's latest victims are still lying in a pool of blood inside their car. Vinny takes this as a sign from God that he should be a good and faithful husband from then on. This proves impossible.

He tries half-heartedly but fails to break off an affair with his boss, Gloria (Bebe Neuwirth), at the hair salon. After getting cold feet one night outside the grungy CBGB in Manhattan's Lower East Side, and failing to gain entrance to the famed disco night-spot Studio 54, Vinny and Dionna end up at Plato's Retreat, the sex club, and engage in group sex. This creates further tension and jealousy. Dionna eventually leaves, after Gloria informs her of Vinny's extramarital activities, and he turns increasingly to drink and drugs.

Ritchie (Adrien Brody), Vinny's friend, is one of the neighborhood youths who has gone "punk," sporting a spiky haircut and affecting a British accent. This puts him at odds with Joe T (Michael Rispoli) and his little band of toughs, who sell drugs for the local crime boss, Luigi (Ben Gazzara). Ritchie has a secret life as a stripper and sometime hustler in a gay hangout. He meanwhile takes up with Ruby (Jennifer Esposito), considered the neighborhood slut. Ritchie and Ruby end up leading a punk band, Late Term Abortion, and live in his mother's garage.

Intercut with these goings-on are scenes of killer David Berkowitz, either stalking and dispatching his victims or shrieking into a pillow and pounding the walls of his miserable apartment.

The police request Luigi's help in the search for the killer. Joe T and his pals set up a local vigilante force and also begin their own investigation into the killings. They draw up a list of "suspects," comprising all the eccentrics and outsiders in the neighborhood. Ritchie, who now has a blonde mohawk haircut, moves steadily up the list. The amateur detectives enlist Vinny, once Ritchie's best friend, in an effort to grab the punk rocker. High on drugs and disoriented, Vinny helps set up his friend, luring him out of his mother's garage and into the street. Joe T and his associates beat Ritchie bloody and

start to drag him off to Luigi. Ritchie's stepfather runs out of the house brandishing a revolver, shouting that the real killer has been arrested by police. The vigilantes back away. Ruby and Ritchie's mother tend to Ritchie, bleeding in the street. Vinny, guilt-stricken, staggers off.

Nothing in the basic outlines of the story would assist a director in creating an original or subtle work. We begin with clichés: the smalltime Lothario with a Madonna-whore complex; the local Mafia chieftain (a part Gazzara walks through); the relentlessly backward and violent locals; the unpopular and difficult loner, perhaps gay as well. Is there any doubt about the direction in which all this will lead?

But it is Spike Lee who introduces the element of active vileness into the process by his treatment of the material. In his coldness, his apparent desire to degrade and humiliate, particularly his white characters, there is something of the pornographer. The scenes of sexual activity involving Leguizamo and Sorvino or Brody and Esposito simply make one wince. There is not a hint of compassion or tenderness in the director's attitude. He obviously revels in this stuff, which is the opposite of openness and frankness. The climax of the most "sensitive" scene in the film, set in a women's toilet, occurs when Ruby, with lots of sexual experience behind her, sardonically asks Dionna, who has just requested some advice, "You want me to tell you how to fuck your husband?"

Lee applies the same crudity, combined with the worst sort of ethnic stereotyping, to his overall portrayal of the Bronx neighborhood and its residents. Joe T and his cohorts are moronic brutes, capable only of cursing, shouting, leering and brawling. (That the original script was written by two individuals with Italian surnames is not the issue. Their script is execrable, but it is above all Lee's contempt and venom that comes through. This is a confirmation, in its own peculiar fashion, of the *auteur* theory, i.e., that the director has the principal artistic influence on a film.) If Lee's work had been made about blacks or Puerto Ricans in New York it would have been rightly denounced as bigotry and hate-mongering.

It is one thing to attend a reactionary political function. One consciously maintains a mental barrier and keeps the event and its participants at a distance. This is more difficult to do in a movie theater, where a steady stream of brightly colored images is bombarding the viewer in the dark. And when a film in part treats the most intimate subjects—with the willing participation of conscientious performers—in the most degrading manner, the trick becomes even more difficult. Watching *Summer of Sam* I felt like I was being poisoned and, apart from walking out, not much could be done about it. This is one of those rare films after whose viewing one feels

somewhat diminished, somewhat *less* of a human being.

Claims are made that Lee is a serious, even innovative filmmaker. This is more or less typical: “Spike Lee burst onto the movie scene in 1986, immediately establishing himself as one of the world’s most important young filmmakers and a controversial figure in African-American culture. ... [Lee] battles to make uncompromising yet commercial films within Hollywood’s white-dominated financing and production system.” Political spinelessness, not aesthetics, motivates such assertions, which of course go entirely unsubstantiated.

I have never seen anything by Lee that was the slightest bit illuminating about the human condition. What light does he shed, for example, on the events of the summer of 1977? Lee excludes from the outset any effort to elucidate the circumstances of Berkowitz’ life. We learn nothing about this background, his environment, his emotional difficulties. He is simply a monster, precisely as the Murdoch press presented him, or, if one wants to be charitable to the film and put the most complex face on it, the congealed expression of the city’s tension and madness.

Nothing is made of the various cultural and social references. The rioting and looting that erupted in mid-July in some of New York’s poorest neighborhoods after a power black-out are given the same weight as disco dancing, Plato’s Retreat, drug-taking and the New York Yankees’ pursuit of the American League pennant.

The bits and pieces that flash across the screen add up to very little. As always in a Lee film, the goings-on are not invested with the slightest trace of social critique or protest. The low point of the film must be the fictional interview with a West Indian woman in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn who exults, for all intents and purposes, in the fact that white people are killing other white people. This, while young people were being shot in the head by a crazed gunman. (The killings are themselves filmed lovingly.) And this is someone celebrated by so-called “lefts”!

I see no evidence to back up the assertions of Lee’s artistic ability. The scenes that are not artificially frenzied (in the manner of music videos or television commercials) are tedious (time seems to stand still!); the narrative is repetitive and confused. The motives of the characters are generally the most obvious and banal. In any event, Lee simply solves dramatic problems in this work by ending each scene in a screaming match or a fist fight. There is always the possibility that in the flood of noise and confusion, the spectator will fail to notice that the director is presenting no serious thoughts or meaningful imagery.

I perused reviews of *Summer of Sam* in respectable publications (including “alternative” publications) with growing astonishment. The film is praised or found wanting, but, in any event, it is taken *seriously*. It is treated as some kind of analysis of the events, or at least a legitimate artistic response. The critical reaction is nearly as telling as the film itself.

Why will no one tell the truth? Lee is a terrible film director, a racist, an individual without the slightest apparent sympathy for human beings (except himself). And the liberal and “left” intelligentsia, terrified of criticizing Lee for fear of being called racist themselves, goes along with the charade.

If one were to separate out the element of race for a moment, this film is little more than a vitriolic attack on a working class neighborhood—whose residents have no real means of defending themselves—by a millionaire filmmaker, a highly-paid employee of Nike, that well-known operator of Asian sweat-shops. Insofar as the critics and others *genuinely* admire Lee and aren’t simply pretending,

it reveals the extent to which the liberal and radical middle class milieu has been steadily drained of its democratic and humanitarian content. Very few, with the stock market at 11,000, go through the motions of expressing concern for the fate of wide layers of the population. One has returned to the days of the pampered, insulated rich, on the one hand, and “the great unwashed,” inarticulate and disenfranchised, on the other.

Of course, one should also not underestimate the element of ignorance and absence of taste in the positive or quasi-positive critical reaction to Lee. The response is simply incomprehensible on any other basis. I don’t care for Quentin Tarantino’s films, but no one would deny the kernel of talent. I thought *Menace II Society* was confused and ultimately quite weak, but the Hughes Brothers obviously have some feeling for film form. Lee makes the vulgar Oliver Stone and the bombastic Brian De Palma look like subtle craftsmen, a not inconsiderable feat.

Lee’s film is framed in a remarkable fashion. *New York Daily News* columnist and writer Jimmy Breslin, who once had certain talent and even oppositional views, introduces *Summer of Sam* by explaining that the film is made about events that took place in the bad old days. Now, he observes, the crime rate is down and the economy is booming! Breslin concludes the film by describing Berkowitz as a psycho who was locked up for life. Apparently no more need be said. This is the level of it. One is exposed to an odious mix of Lee’s psychosexual peculiarities, ethno-chauvinism, social backwardness and law and orderism. In reality, the film expresses the outlook of a section of the New York City elite.

So the farce continues. Everyone goes along with the claim that Spike Lee represents something positive in American filmmaking. Everyone who knows better keeps his or her mouth shut. Lee is largely an invention, a public relations gimmick. His career as a filmmaker is a hollow shell that has been filled up with a fictitious content by various elements for their own self-serving reasons. For its part, the establishment had need of a black filmmaker, who would be “hip” enough to maintain a modicum of credibility in these politically confused times and sufficiently cynical, opportunist and selfish to toe the line on all important issues. Lee answered the call. He is a representative of the opportunist and grasping black petty bourgeoisie that emerged following the collapse of the civil rights movement and the radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s. Its watchwords are self-pity, self-interest and self-promotion.

Lee is nothing of any importance in the history of American cinema; he does, however, represent something in American social life—but something unfeeling, something distinctly repellent.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact